

**Bangor University**

## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**The metousiastics of culture**

**European relativism in literature and cinema**

Mild, Matthew

*Award date:*  
2015

*Awarding institution:*  
Bangor University

[Link to publication](#)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 10. Mar. 2025

**THE METOUSIASTICS OF CULTURE**

**European Relativism in Literature and Cinema**

By Matthew Mild

A PhD Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a PhD in European Studies

Bangor University, School of Modern Languages and Cultures. April 2015.



## Abstract

This inquiry examines the connection of relativism with cultural identity in contemporary European films and novels. The focus is on representations of marginal bodies challenging essentialist understandings of cultural identity, called metousiastic. The method is semiotic and discourse analysis of literary and visual texts from a poststructuralist theoretical stance. The main texts are twelve novels and twelve films, chosen for the purpose of a cohesive discussion about four main thematic and stylistic features. Although this project started off from German and Italian works at the geo-historical borders of modern western and other European ideologies, the inquiry engages also with texts in other languages. Chapter 1 addresses the questions raised in the introduction and provides their rationale in the shift from essentialist to more sceptical understandings of cultural memory and identity. Chapters 2 to 5 deal with the four relativist themes and styles selected. Authors and film-directors include György Pálfi (Hungary), Gianni Amelio (Italy), Juli Zeh (Germany), Ian McEwan (Britain), Amélie Nothomb (Belgium), Alejandro Amenábar (Spain), Erik de Bruyn (the Netherlands), Lars von Trier (Denmark), and José Saramago (Portugal). Chapter 2 argues that relativist portrayals of the body and the mind question essentialist norms of health. Chapter 3 contends that work and play supply a thematic tool apt to defy age-roles. Chapter 4 zooms in on the biopolitical implications of social bonds in which heteronormative discourses are criticised. Chapter 5 extends this anti-essentialist or metousiastic critique to intercultural relationships challenging ethnocentric narratives, which add the fourth and last comparative reading. The conclusion examines these tropes further. This final section further refines the argument that the four stylistic and thematic features analysed offer a new remodelling of cultural identity based on the relativist awareness of the social and historical shaping of the body at the margins of conventional norms.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	7
I.     ESSENTIALISM AND RELATIVIST IDENTITIES.....	33
II.    THE METAPHOR OF FLUX AND HEALTH AS AN IDENTIFIER	
<i>Pirandellian Bodies.....</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>Renewal in Juli Zeh's Narratives.....</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>The Cinema of Passive Terrorism.....</i>	<i>102</i>
<i>Fluidity as a Key-image.....</i>	<i>105</i>
III.   THE ECSTASY OF OVERTHROWING AGE CONVENTIONS	
<i>Metarchy vs. Hierarchy.....</i>	<i>115</i>
<i>Exploring Metarchic Labyrinths.....</i>	<i>128</i>
<i>The Vicious Circle.....</i>	<i>143</i>
<i>Revealing Revelling in Shifting Shapes.....</i>	<i>158</i>

IV. EROS AS A TROPE AND THE IDENTIFIER OF GENDER

*Sublime Androgyny*.....161

*The Cyclical Order of Eros*.....178

*Creative Sublimation*.....186

*Critical Desire in Literary and Filmic Discourses*.....204

V. HUBRIS FROM COSMIC TRAGEDIES TO ETHNIC HYBRIDITY

*Dis-estrangement*.....208

*Outlining Hybrid Horizons*.....218

*Amor Fati*.....248

*The Category of Overcoming*.....288

VI. THE AESTHETICS OF METOUSIA AND EUROPEAN

RELATIVISM.....289

CITED REFERENCES.....294

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Laura and Tony for their comments and support. Special thanks go to the skeptical ethics and critical theory reading groups, and everyone in IGRS/IMLR and the department of languages at Bangor University, particularly to Jordi, Helena Chadderton, and Nicki, who have meanwhile moved elsewhere. Drawing on a wide range of primary sources, the scope of this enquiry was a challenge.<sup>1</sup> Thank you, Laura Lepschy and Shirley, for reading and commenting on my work on twentieth-century writing. Your unyielding belief in the use of my occasionally misunderstood contributions has kept me going. Thank you, Laura Calisti, for being there all along. And thank you, Maria Cristina, Patrycja, Clara, Martina, Gareth, Myfyr, Deak, and Owain. I also wish to thank Gillian, Ian, and William from back at Salford, Greater Manchester. My thanks go also to Einar in Oslo, Luciana in Adelaide, Mads in Aarhus, John in Dublin, and all acquaintances from my yearly seminars in Vancouver, Providence, Toronto, and New York.

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own.

## INTRODUCTION

Films and novels engage with multiple social and cultural frames which include European relativism. This stylistic and thematic framework is the subject discussed in the following pages. The social meanings of situational difference for cultural identity are dealt with through the lens of European relativism in the films and novels examined here, which are selected particularly from the Italian and the German context owing to the historical and socio-political interests pursued in this thesis. Works with relativist themes and styles revolving around and developed upon the relativist trope of the body are explored in this enquiry, which tries to answer a complex research question. This enquiry is centred on the following research question: what styles and topics are used by films and novels which show the heatedly debated meaning of relativism for European identity? This adds a fresh literary and cinematic contribution to the debate on European identity and essentialism. However, the focus of this thesis is not European identity as such, but rather the anti-essentialist relativist themes and styles explored in the European literary and filmic works under scrutiny.

This enquiry deals with this question in a form which shows how films and novels link up European identity to situational otherness, or *metousiastics* – that is, the overcoming (*met-*) of scornful cultural essences (*-ousia*) through the public praise and trust of the ultimately scorned situational body of the Other, or otherwise denominated site and/or subject of difference. The goal envisaged here is to show how images of cultural memory from novels and films underscore the meaning of situational otherness and social change for European identity, as well



as which styles and topics are summoned in these imageries, in relation to definitions of the four main metousiastic relativist themes of body and mind, work and play, social relations, and cross-cultural situations. Although it is possible to treat novels and films separately, this enquiry also stresses that the two forms complement each other through their interdependent use of writing and acting across the two media to represent identity and otherness. What follows is an exploration of European relativism as marked by situational Others and social change.

These two main features and European identity itself are not givens, as they are historically shaped in various ways. In this context, situational otherness refers to the side of identity which is marked by relativity to – or contingency upon – specific social and historical settings – or situations – where otherness and the body are defined in ever new manners. Social change is the relevant process of cultural memory, in which earlier settings of identity and otherness give way to new ones whereby the bodies of the Others who were scorned or misunderstood come to be praised and trusted. The meanings of situational otherness and social change for European identity also highlight its historical shaping, which means that European identity is not a universally accepted given.

The goal of this enquiry is, therefore, to provide an overview that outlines salient stylistic and thematic features of the outlook of European relativism as a helpful component of the historical reshaping of European identity, which can be found in the metousiastics or cultural anti-essentialism of the novels and films in review. The themes of body and mind, work and play, social bonds, and cross-cultural situations are discussed in each of the four analytic chapters with a focus

on the textual subthemes of mental health (*Corpus Delicti*, *L'Etranger*, and *Uno, nessuno e centomila*) and disability (*Le chiavi di casa*, *Mar Adentro*, and *vincent will meer*), hierarchy (*Das Glasperlenspiel*, *Het Carnaval der burgers*, and *Il nome della rosa*) and education (*L'imbalsamatore*, *Taxidermia*, and *Das weiße Band*), love (*V.M. 18*, *Le Voyage d'hiver*, and *Das Parfum*) and friendship (*Saturno contro*, *Huit femmes*, and *Vier Minuten*), and old cross-cultural clashes (*Oceano mare*, *Black Dogs*, and *Im Krebsgang*) and new transcultural experiences (*Auf der anderen Seite*, *Um filme falado*, and *La sconosciuta*). First of all, though, a few examples may illustrate that writing and acting do reflect on issues strongly related to European identity. In order to furnish a twofold introduction to the rationale and plan of this thesis, this introduction supplies, first, a brief account of a few cases confirming the existence of a strong link between European identity and works of writing and acting, particularly from mainstream literature and cinema. The ways in which this link is helpful to discuss relativism and essentialism are shown by an introductory review on philosophical and political debates about European identity and postmodern notions of space. An overview on the question posed and the method used in this enquiry is, then, provided.

This introduction has the twofold goal to motivate and explain what this thesis endeavours to achieve, that is, an exploratory and experimental enquiry, whose experimental character lies in its use of an interdisciplinary *comparative* analytic method to discuss select novels and films whose dealings with *cultural memory* show the meaning of *situational* openness to manifold *others* and social change for European cultural *identity*. This enquiry attempts to answer the question of the literary and visual representation of European identity as relative

to – or contingent upon – specific social situations defining embodied otherness within given historical circumstances, as raised in some philosophical and political debates about situational relativism. The comparative analysis undertaken here follows up on insights supplied in the thriving fields of otherness and cultural memory.

This introductory overview also explains why and how this selection of texts was made, also in relation to their respective historical contexts. This exploratory and experimental corpus has come to encompass a German novel, a German film, an Italian novel and an Italian film in each of the four transnational literary-filmic sections in this thesis, although comparisons with works from other language areas are also made wherever suitable. This introduction also highlights the importance of focusing on works in Italian and German to discuss European identity as social otherness in the aftermath of nationalism. The overview explains the rationale behind the case studies and mentions some features from the twelve novels *Uno, nessuno e centomila* [*One, No One and A Hundred Thousand*] by Luigi Pirandello, *Corpus Delicti* [same title] by Juli Zeh, *L'Etranger* [*The Stranger*] by Albert Camus, *Il nome della rosa* [*The Name of the Rose*] by Umberto Eco, *Das Glasperlenspiel* [*The Glass Beads' Game*] by Hermann Hesse, *Het Carnaval der burgers* [*The Carnival of the Citizens*] by Menno ter Braak, *V.M. 18* [*Age Restricted*] by Isabella Santacroce, *Das Parfum* [*The Perfume*] by Patrick Süskind, *Le Voyage d'hiver* [*The Winter Journey*] by Amélie Nothomb, *Oceano mare* [*Ocean Sea*] by Alessandro Baricco, *Black Dogs* by Ian McEwan, and *Im Krebsgang* [*Crabwalk*] by Günter Grass, and the twelve films *vincent will meer* [*Vincent wants more sea*] by Ralf Huettner, *Le chiavi di casa* [*The*

*Housekeys*] by Gianni Amelio, *Mar Adentro* [*The Sea Within*] by Alejandro Amenábar, *Das weiße Band* [*The White Ribbon*] by Michael Haneke, *L'imbalsamatore* [*The Taxidermist*] by Matteo Garrone, *Taxidermia* [same title] by Gjörgy Pálfy, *Vier Minuten* [*Four Minutes*] by Chris Kraus, *Saturno contro* [*Saturn in Opposition*] by Ferzan Ozpetek, *Huit femmes* [*Eight Women*] by François Ozon, *Auf der anderen Seite* [*The Edge of Heaven*] by Fatih Akin, *Um filme falado* [*A Talking Picture / A Spoken Film*] by Manoel de Oliveira, and *La sconosciuta* [*The Unknown Woman*] by Giuseppe Tornatore.

This is not meant to analyse extensively any of these works, but to comparatively and experimentally explore the four features of European identity as situational otherness which are exposed in each section, that is, body and mind, work and play, social bonds, and cross-cultural settings. How these four social issues from the literary and cinematic images of cultural memory within the chosen texts relate to the question of European identity and situational otherness will become clear in the close of this introduction. It is helpful to briefly frame and outline what kind of European identity is considered here and, thereby, introduce the main relevant debates surrounding the concept of European identity. Looking at European identity as marked by embodied situational otherness may help redefine the place of Europe in the aftermath of the hegemonies of nationalism, communism, and capitalism, similarly and simultaneously to an on-going redefinition of the historical role of non-western regions:

Such destabilization of identities and crossing of carefully policed boundaries promise [...] [to] resist both romanticization and Orientalist

distancing. This post-foundational move, implicit in the emerging writings, affiliates the new [...] historiography with poststructuralism, and together they both echo the postmodernist decentring of unitary subjects and hegemonic histories. [...] The attempt to unlock history [...] is thus not so much a question [...] of taking pleasure in the revealed Bakhtinian carnivalesque but an issue of engaging the relations of domination.<sup>2</sup>

As reviewed in the next section, the links of European identity with situational Others aims at challenging hallowed definitions and foundations of selfhood deified within modern structures by turning to uproariously grotesque and carnivalesque subversions of power relations. The ethical and rational grounds shaken by this ironic overthrow are, namely, made sacred through moral and modern norms of nature, as follows from the historical evidence supplied among others in the work of historiography quoted above.

The carnivalesque and its grotesque tropes of corporeality explored by Mikhail Bakhtin are, therefore, important tools of social change. Their aesthetic effects are in no way apolitical or limited to supplying pleasurable emotions and sensations apt to be exploited for commercial purposes. In advocating the use of Wilhelm von Humboldt's 'dialogical approach to cultural diversity', accounts of cultural identity based on textual representation have engaged with Bakhtin's notion of *vnenakhodimost*, which means finding one's own self somewhere outside.<sup>3</sup> The metousiastics of European relativism amounts to this overcoming of

---

<sup>2</sup> Prakash, Gyan, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1990), pp. 406-7.

<sup>3</sup> Mussgnug, Florian, "The Foreigner's Gaze: Constructions of National Identity and Alterity in Post-war Italian Literature", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 38., No. 2 (2002), p. 201.

essential inside-ness, and its literary and cinematic grotesque tropes are the subject of these pages. Before delving into this, and saving for the first chapter the significance of the German and Italian focus in this thesis, this introduction aims to highlight and expand on the relevance of writing and acting to the aforementioned historical goal and, subsequently, shows how this endeavour is pursued in the following sections.

The kind of identity examined here in relation to writing and acting is one which follows military, technological, and economic changes, whereby unitary and strong sources of collective belonging are overcome:

Because membership in a nation-state can no longer reasonably [be claimed to] assure employment, security [...], or a meaningful family and social life, membership in a political community becomes a fleeting and constantly moving horizon for many people, rather than a secure, permanent, and lifelong identity. The imagining of politics as located in some central representation of unified, territorially based power [...] is difficult to conjure in the minds of ever more nomadic people. [...] For many [rich and poor] in the current global order, one takes whatever nation-state one can find, often at great cost to one's sense of cultural identity. [...] The [technologically enabled] global circulation of culture seems to be creating hybrid identities for more and more people, identities that draw simultaneously on various cultural traditions in ways that form novel juxtapositions and syntheses in individuals and groups. Recognizing this, some states have tried to manage cultural multiplicity [...].

[P]ostmodernism [...] is [...] a loose descriptor of trends [...] in the [...] decentring of the subject, and [...] a decline in the salience of centralizing and totalizing [...] authority in favo[u]r of more layered, complex relations of authorities within the self, or community.<sup>4</sup>

What is discussed here is precisely a European identity whose fleeting state takes shape in relation to its inclusivity of Others, who are defined in shifting terms depending on the various situations where selfhood and otherness are found. This runs counter to the view of cultural identity as a universally accepted strong sense of superiority given by God or nature and a sense of belonging to an everlasting, exclusive collective entity to defend against and impose over others.<sup>5</sup> A meaningful link exists between an inclusive envisioning of European identity and works of writing and acting, as may be shown by zooming in, without dwelling too long, on Juli Zeh, the youngest and most heavily politically engaged author included in this enquiry.

Juli Zeh writes novels concerned with the dominant claim to scientific and objective truth in modern western settings. Her characters and plots show how truth is actually relative to situations where dominant and subaltern interests are defined. Her novel with the title *Corpus Delicti* examined in the section about body and mind deals, on the one hand, with this issue in relation to such problems as social safety, civil disobedience, and mainstream visions of fit and healthy

---

<sup>4</sup> Opello, Walter C., & Rosow, Stephen J., *The Nation State and Global Order: A Historical Introduction to Contemporary Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), pp. 259-61.

<sup>5</sup> Although this point has been made in the specific case of Germany, this is one feature of cultural belonging as such, as stability is what any sense of belonging strives for. Conze, Vanessa, *Das Europa der Deutschen: Ideen von Europa in Deutschland zwischen Reichstradition und Westorientierung*, (Munich: Oldenburg Verlag, 2005), p. 40.

bodies. On the other hand, monstrously sick and ugly bodies polluted with dirt host defiant minds that become vehicles of subversion. This displays the ideological goals pursued by the dominant vision of scientific and objective truth which is upheld within capitalist societies relying on science and technology.

The example of Juli Zeh's novel is meant to introduce here the rationale of this enquiry, along with the selection of texts to discuss. Unlike such authors as Oriana Fallaci, whose protest against an alleged Islamization of Europe is emblematic of an essentialist kind of European identity, the novels and films chosen supply a variety of ways to ironically define a European identity devoid of any essentialist definitions as a universally accepted given – quixotic though this undertaking may sound. On the one hand, Eurocentric authors like Oriana Fallaci follow the Enlightenment ideal of cumulative objective knowledge about body and mind aimed at progress both in work and in leisure, with objective benefits for social relationships and cross-cultural situations, where non-Europeans are supposed to learn from Europeans. On the other hand, authors like Juli Zeh follow a different ideal from the Enlightenment, that is, the relativity of knowledge to situations where body and mind, work and play, social bonds, and cross-cultural settings are defined without imposing any kind of objective truth over Others.

As this makes clear, textual images of body and mind, work and play, social relationships, and cross-cultural situations are of great importance to collective imaginings of European identity. This enquiry starts off precisely from this strong link between the overcoming of essentialism in cultural memory and situational otherness. In tune with this understanding of otherness, metousiastic relativism amounts to the semiotic and discursive shift of the longing for social or



cultural belonging from the essentialist enactment of Enlightenment-based loathing to the dynamic experience of mutual learning and self-renewal.

The increasingly problematic character of essentialism is evident from relevant early twenty-first century discussions. Thomas Risse shows that European identity is not only one layer of collective belonging on top of national and regional identity, as elements from all these layers are actually blended in a European identity where essentialist and absolutist borders are blurred.<sup>6</sup> Memory is an issue of particular significance in the overcoming of national identities investigated in imagology, especially in contemporary European culture.<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson raises some meaningful issues about such imagined communities as those previous to the transnational community referred to wherever European identity is conjured:

Theorists of nationalism have often been perplexed [...] by these three paradoxes: (1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. (2) The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept – in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as he or she 'has' a gender – vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, 'Greek' nationality is *sui generis*. (3) The

---

<sup>6</sup> Risse, Thomas, "Neofunctionalism, European Identity, and the Puzzles of European integration", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2005), p. 296.

<sup>7</sup> Rorato, Laura & Saunders, Anna (eds.), *The Essence and the Margin: National Identities and Collective Memories in Contemporary European Culture* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009).

‘political’ power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence.<sup>8</sup>

These paradoxes motivate the undertaking of manifold enquiries into such transnational cases of cultural memory as that of European identity. The subject of relativism and identity is crucial in the debates on current multicultural Europe. In the Europe of the early twenty-first century it has been observed that the longing for cultural identity is strong like before, yet in a new, disenchanted way derived from the ever more pervasive confrontation with cultural multiplicity and contamination. Bo Stråth analysed European identity as an unstable fiction created in opposition to non-Europeans throughout history, which favoured European integration in the last thirty years of the twentieth century but cannot support intercultural dialogue in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> Looking for a way towards a ‘re-conceptualization’ of Europe, he suggested that the dialectics of the Enlightenment, along with a more flexible concept of culture, can be a point of departure. Involving the awareness of the contingent and transitory character of all essentialist conceptions, relativism deploys exactly such metousiastics, that is, the overcoming of essentialism.

The intertextuality across modern and postmodern literature displays fascinating continuities, besides the obvious differences. As the terms *modern* and *postmodern* have been variously interpreted, it is necessary to state that their use in the present context reflects the way in which modernity relies on the ideology of progress, while postmodernity calls into question the objectivity of anything

---

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (1983), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Stråth, Bo, ‘A European Identity. To the Historical Limits of a Concept’, *European Journal of Social Theory* (2002), 5, 387-401.

which could be named as progress in a modernist sense. The modern literary texts discussed here share a sharp criticism of the modern ideology of progress, which is of great significance in postmodernism. In fact, modernity is characterized by an essentialist teleology which, in applying Platonic idealism and the Christian conception of redemption to the material world of the here and now, hinges upon the belief in scientific and material progress. On the contrary, the relevant modern literary texts suggest that progress is only an illusion, as modern development is only relative to the goals set by modern rationalism, which actually involves a decadence of creativity and criticism, that is, in terms of the existential force of imagination, of which examples can be found in aesthetic subversions of such epistemological and ethical distinctions as good vs. evil and beauty vs. ugliness.

It is important, then, to revalue the decadent valuations of morality and modern science. This is possible in the *relativist* deployment of creativity and criticism to subvert both moral and modern hierarchies of value in finding glory in decadence, good in evil, and beauty in ugliness. In this respect, the modern texts in question constitute the precedents of the postmodern deconstruction of all kinds of hierarchies of value. This is emblematically the case in the works discussed here, as will be contended. Such a relativist tendency is of remarkable importance for the current European and global flows, as the ensuing cultural phenomena have been challenging numerous essentialist discourses sanctioning absolute values.

Textual analysis is a semiotic method, as it examines signs,<sup>10</sup> precisely not for what, but for how, that is, the ways in which they mean.<sup>11</sup> Language is only

---

<sup>10</sup> See: Eco, Umberto, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: MacMillan, 1976), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> See: Sturrock, John, *Structuralism* (London: Paladin, 2003), p. 22.

one of the infinite and all-pervasive systems of signs in use,<sup>12</sup> and presents a level of abstraction which makes it particularly suitable in the philosophical discussion of being.<sup>13</sup> Identity is socially constructed in and through narratives which articulate meaningful memory.<sup>14</sup> Memory is a dynamic process where antecedent utterances and meanings are renegotiated.<sup>15</sup> Using language, or, for that matter, any other semiotic system, involves a dialectics between the available means to create meaning.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, texts' cultural contexts play a significant role,<sup>17</sup> which hints at the desirability of an interdisciplinary socio-historic-philosophical approach. Interdisciplinarity implies a different use of the disciplines adopted. It is no surprise that, though centring on the socio-historical context of relevant texts, the philosophical discussion of intertextual relations unfolds across apparently different contexts, which all converge in the wider semiotic system of modernity. Daring comparisons abound in cultural analysis, where pornography, literature, and philosophy from Aristotle to Proust have been examined in a fruitful comparative way.<sup>18</sup> The present discussion of metousiastic relativism in European cultural identity takes into account literary and cinematic texts, so as to combine the seeming abstractness of language with the realistic tendency of moving pictures. This particular combination allows a discussion accounting for linguistic and audiovisual systems of signs, that is, those forms of communication which are

---

<sup>12</sup> See: Barthes, Roland, *Elements of Semiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> The abstraction of linguistic signs is discussed in: Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> Rigney, Ann, Plenitude, Scarcity and the Production of Cultural Memory, *Journal of European Studies* (2006), 35, 1/2, 209-26.

<sup>16</sup> See: Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> See: Lotman, Yuri, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 124-125.

<sup>18</sup> See: Aydemir, Murat, *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

ranked as highest in European imaginaries, as illustrated for instance in the novel *Das Parfum* considered in this analysis.

Detailed textual analysis yields precious insights.<sup>19</sup> This literary methodology offers a suitable procedure to reflect on identity and language, as metaphors involve the establishment of identity relationships which overcome the essentially defined boundaries between conventionally distinct entities. The method of analysis is intercultural, interdisciplinary, intersectional, and intertextual. Historical, sociological, and philosophical insights are integrated to conduct the analysis. Besides involving comparisons across different texts, the discussion centres on the intersections of social differences constituting the crucial conventions overcome in the relevant metaphors. The combination of interculturality, intertextuality, interdisciplinarity, and intersectionality is appropriate to a semiosis, that is, a contribution to the critique of essentialism, where constructs of essence (ousia) are deconstructed into their semiotic units. As a semiotic sub-method, this approach is semiotic. The present discussion focuses attention on essentialism in the relationships between literary and filmic signs. The intellectual background of this methodology is contextual cultural criticism.

Since the end of the world wars, remarkable analytic projects have addressed the powers and limits of cultural contexts. Developed in the institutional frame of the Frankfurt School, critical theory highlights the importance of culture in society and politics. The possibilities of interpreting cultural texts are enhanced in post-structuralism, which has an important centre in France and is fundamental in the research conducted at the Amsterdam School for

---

<sup>19</sup> An extensive discussion on this specific aspect is offered in: Jordanova, Ludmilla, *Languages of Nature. Critical Essays on Science and Literature* (London: Free Association Books, 1986).

Cultural Analysis. In Italy, ‘weak thought’ questions the ideal of any absolute values independent from specific contexts. Originated in America, postmodern thought values emancipation from social norms through cultural changes. Critical theory, post-structuralism, postmodern thought, weak thought, and cultural analysis<sup>20</sup> enable the discussion of cultural contexts in relation to political ideologies, normative discourses, hegemonic hierarchies, foundational principles, and linear narratives, e.g., those related to nationalism, communism, and liberalism. Critique of this sort involves the identification of the dichotomous valuations represented by texts.

In the hegemony of western liberalism following the European crises of absolutism, nationalism, and communism, the tensions between local communalisms and global individualism are central in relation to the renegotiation of global-local identity and memory, as in the encounter between western and migrant cultures. From a Nietzschean-Foucauldian philosophical perspective, identity results from the cultural relations between the historical discourse and the subject. As conceptualized in sociology,<sup>21</sup> identities involve the subject’s intersections of discursive differences, e.g., language, class, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, health, and age. Texts constitute the sites of cultural memory, where identities are represented in the relationships between the textual images and their cultural contexts. Intercultural, intertextual, intersectional, and interdisciplinary socio-historic-philosophical analyses enable discussion of global-

---

<sup>20</sup> For critical theory, see the work of Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Marcuse; for post-structuralism, Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault; for postmodern thought, Butler and Connolly; for weak thought, Vattimo; and for cultural analysis, Alphen, Aydemir, and Bal.

<sup>21</sup> See: Crenshaw, Kimberle, Intersectionality and identity politics: learning from violence against women of color, in *Feminist theory. A reader*, ed. by W. K. Kolmar & F. Bartkowski (New York: McGrawHill, 2005)

local identity and memory. The remediation of global-local identity and memory involves the questioning of the linear narrative of progress in social organization. The hybrid experiences of migration and international integration challenge the ideal purity of modernity, as non-modern discourses play a significant part. Nietzsche's and Foucault's critique of modernity is a considerable reference point for the global-local renegotiation of identity and memory following the crisis of modernity.

Nietzsche's and Foucault's techno-scientific metaphors criticize organicism, that is, the conception of being and society as constituted by distinct physical organs with specific functions serving the conservation of the whole intelligent system by means of the enforcement of essential rules.<sup>22</sup> Organicism implies a linear hierarchy of worth based on the intersections of class, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, health, and age, where the mind to be served is ownership, reproductive masculinity, whiteness, legality, fitness, and adulthood, while the others are working bodies controlled by strict rules. Identity involves the linear memory of those norms and values opposed to the abnormal and invalid, that is, opposed to otherness.<sup>23</sup> While identity implies purity, otherness is intrinsically impure and hybrid. The sense of self is cultivated and worshipped in forms of cult within culture as if in a cell, beyond whose walls reigns the uncontrollable occult (that is, unknown) force, as emphasized in the Sanskrit origin of all these words presenting the c-l consonant combination. As with all

---

<sup>22</sup> Sheridan (1980), Lash (1984), and Merquior (1985) highlight the importance of the body in Nietzsche's genealogical and Foucault's archaeological philosophies, particularly regarding collective memory; Lash, Scott, "Genealogy and the Body: Foucault/Deleuze/Nietzsche", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (1984); Merquior, José Guilherme, *Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Sheridan, Alan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.).

<sup>23</sup> Dichotomous oppositions are fundamental in Derrida's analyses, see: Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, Mar.: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974).

kinds of hybridization pervading all cultural contexts, the global-local renegotiation of identity and memory challenges the dichotomy of cult forms and occult force by blurring the linear sense of self with the hybrid otherness of global and local tendencies. This is illustrated by the situation where western and migrant cultures encounter and, in order to control possible conflicts, assimilate part of each other's cultures, thus giving up part of their respective linear hierarchy of values derived either from morality or from modernity.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), the Nietzschean theory of language as intrinsically metaphorical and of reality as experienced in ways which are inescapably mediated by language is applied in the critical discussion of morality in the context of the emergence of modernity in Europe. In this light, the punishment of immorality is conceptualized as the means for sustaining and nourishing a collective memory of what is perceived as moral justice. In turn, moral justice is understood as a construction whereby the powerless resentfully take revenge on the powerful. In this context, the powerful are those who linguistically name reality from their perspective, on whom the powerless take revenge by turning language against them and founding a whole gamut of moral principles upon this distorted language. Moral principles, then, as well as the scientific knowledge which replaces morality in modernity, consist of linguistic interpretations of reality which masquerade as real facts and travel from one generation to the next in the commemorative enforcement of moral rituals. Nietzsche made an intervention in the political issues raised by the emergence of modern western societies which accomplishes a philosophical demystification of



religious *and* scientific ideologies, as a passage from the twenty-fifth section of the third part emblematically exemplifies:

[...] physiologisch nachgerechnet, ruht die Wissenschaft auf dem gleichen Boden wie das asketische Ideal: eine gewisse *Verarmung des Lebens* ist hier wie dort die Voraussetzung,—die Affekte kühl geworden, das tempo verlangsamt, die Dialektik an Stelle des Instinktes, der *Ernst* den Gesichtern und Gebärden aufgedrückt.<sup>24</sup>

Far from overcoming dogmatism, the modern reliance on science is yet another form of worship which represses the vital force of creativity.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault developed in the context of post-structuralism upon Nietzsche's ideas, which he also applied to discuss the ways in which clinical and disciplinary practices replace moral institutions to perpetuate the hegemonic epistemological discourse. In this respect, knowledge depends on the discourses within which it is situated. The discourses, in turn, always involve the recuperation and rearrangement of a number of discursive forms which are conceptualized as stored in an imaginary archive of archaeological memory. It is in the process of remediation whereby epistemological discourses are overcome and reproduced that the subject is created.<sup>25</sup> In cultural commemoration or remembrance or memory, then, what deserves particular attention from a Nietzsche-Foucauldian perspective is not

---

<sup>24</sup> '[...] physiologically, science rests on the same ground as the ascetic ideal: a certain *impoverishment of life* is the condition of them both – affects [are] cooled down, the pace slowed down, dialectic [acts] instead of instinct, seriousness [is] printed on faces and gestures.'

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, Michel, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 191.

merely the emancipation of the commemorator from the commemorated, but rather the recuperation, rearrangement and reproduction of older discursive elements in always new cultural forms in the relations of such new cultural forms with the older ones.

Nietzsche and Foucault counter both moral and modern linear, that is, male gendered, narratives of normality with circular, that is, female gendered, narratives of interpretation. Where cultural identity is concerned, their critiques overcome the essentialist ideals of moral redemption and modern progress. Their alternative is the recognition of both religious and scientific truths as mere interpretations. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari contended that overcoming essentialism along Nietzsche's and Foucault's theories involves an endless deterritorialization where identity is ever redefined as in a positive form of schizophrenia.<sup>26</sup> The present analysis intends to discuss this alternative for European identity in the global-local context.

A circular conception of identity allows for the inclusion of otherness in ever different redefinitions as appropriate to any relevant specific circumstances, which is crucial in the accelerated processes of European integration and global-local hybridization. The image of the ouroboros, that is, the tail-devouring being, with its circular shape, represents the indistinguishable occult force, as opposed to the linear distinction of forms of identity through normative memory. In oriental legends, the circular transience of being is embodied by the Indian goddess of time, Kali, who is the female symbol of destruction, time, and otherness, and both the restless dance of the Greek hybrids known as satyrs and the voracity of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, & Guattari, Félix, *L'Anti-Œdipe – Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (1972), p. 321.

harpies hint at the wild oscillation between forms of creation and the occult force of crisis, that is, between the creative and the critical. As with all other monsters and images of otherness, of which the epitomes are the devil and death, hitting indiscriminately all members of the linear hierarchy of society, they suggest the uncanny ambiguity of otherness, in opposition to which linear narratives of identity and memory are formed and cultivated in the cults which constitute culture. In order to prevent the systematic exclusion sanctioned by linear narratives of identity, it is possible to focus on textual images of otherness and hybridity.

Ubiquitous across cultural contexts, carnivalesque or grotesque<sup>27</sup> textual images proliferate in global-local contexts, also through the media-based diffusion of so-called popular culture, with as a turning point the advent of films. Called into question by the European crisis of ideology, the disasters of the world wars, and their global-local renegotiation, linear narratives of identity and memory are blurred with circular ones centring on otherness, in the convergence of cult forms and occult force. The analysis of global-local narratives of identity and memory relies on the conceptual means to discuss the ways in which the cult forms of linearly remembered identity and the occult force of otherness are juxtaposed in the cultural relations between textual images and their cultural contexts. This conceptual framework is particularly appropriate to the discussion of metousiastic relativism in European cultural identity across literary and cinematic texts, where hybridity and otherness are displayed.

---

<sup>27</sup> For extensive discussions on the grotesque, see: Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World: Carnival and the Grotesque* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).

While essentialism hinges on the belief in a common origin of members belonging to Europe, a relativist reading shows the making of common policies stemming from various different angles.<sup>28</sup> On 31st May 2003, a group of prominent intellectuals published their ideas on a European foreign policy. The leader of the initiative, Jürgen Habermas explained in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that, with the international protests against the Iraq-war, the right moment had come for Europe to redefine its role in the world.<sup>29</sup> On the same day, this article appeared also in *Libération* thanks to the co-author Jacques Derrida. Umberto Eco expressed similar ideas in *Repubblica*, Adolf Muschg in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Fernando Savater in *El País*, Gianni Vattimo in *La Stampa*, and Richard Rorty in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.<sup>30</sup> In his article, Habermas stated, ‘The acceptance of differences – the reciprocal acceptance of the other in its otherness – can become a distinguishing feature of a common identity’, and remembered as something typical of the Europeans that they do not rely on technological progress in an uncritically optimistic way. Emanuele Severino’s contribution on the critical spirit distinguishing European identity can also be understood in these terms.<sup>31</sup> Habermas and his supporters, along with Severino, highlight that the tendency to question pre-existing certainties has characterized European identity over time. They point out the value of anti-dogmatic doubt across different historical ages.

---

<sup>28</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*, (Frankfurt: Campus, 1994), p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, Nach dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (2003, May 31).

<sup>30</sup> The coordinated publications are reported in: Fredriksson, Carl Henrik, Att blåsa liv i en europeisk offentlighet, *Eurozine* (2004). Available at: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2004-05-13-fredriksson-sv.html>

<sup>31</sup> Severino, Emanuele, Quello spirito critico che viene da Atene, *Repubblica* (20th June 2004); Severino, Emanuele, *La filosofia futura* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1989/2005).

In contrast, the pro-Vatican philosopher Marcello Pera believes that European ‘ethos’ and ‘telos’ derive from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and that relativism is weakening European identity.<sup>32</sup> In fact, in the Catholic Church the leadership was in recent previous years taken by Joseph Ratzinger, who seems to hold a crystal-clear view of relativism as essentially evil, as he:

would say that today relativism predominates. It seems that whoever is not a relativist is someone who is intolerant. To think that one can understand the essential truth is already seen as something intolerant.

However, in reality this exclusion of truth is a type of very grave intolerance and reduces essential things of human life to subjectivism. In this way, in essential things we no longer have a common view. Each one can and should decide as he can. So we lose the ethical foundations of our common life. Christ is totally different from all the founders of other religions, and he cannot be reduced to a Buddha, a Socrates or a Confucius. He is really the bridge between heaven and earth, the light of truth who has appeared to us. The gift of knowing Jesus does not mean that there are no important fragments of truth in other religions. In the light of Christ, we can establish a fruitful dialogue with a point of reference in which we can see how all these fragments of truth contribute to greater depth in our faith and to an authentic spiritual community of humanity.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Pera, Marcello, *Liberale, Cannibali e Cristiani*, *Il Giornale* (2005, September 22); Pera, Marcello & Ratzinger, Joseph, *Sena radici: Europa, Relativismo, Cristianesimo, Islam* (Milano: Mondadori, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph, Interview for the Catholic International Agency *Zenit* (2002) . Available at: <http://www.zenit.org/article-5961?l=english>

The medieval idea of a Europe distinguished by religious unity, abandoned after the bloodshed of the religious wars, can be easily recognized as one of the essentialist concepts which fail to promote intercultural dialogue.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the idea of Europe as essentially Judaeo-Christian is inadequate to face the cultural and social phenomena of European and global hybridization which are typical of the twenty-first century. This does not mean that any alternative essentialist view of Europe is upheld here, such as one where this continent is essentially different from Asia or Africa. This inquiry does not engage with this essentialist view, as its frame of reference is not any European essence, but rather the historical contingency of the European Union, whose enlargements to come are not foreseeable.

This essentialist reading is linked with the discourse of the Occident as an order of nation-states, whose failure is marked by the attempts of the National Socialists to impose their model of organization over Europe, and particularly eastern European countries.<sup>35</sup> A project meant to erase differences is also found in the essentialist strand of the French Revolution.<sup>36</sup> What these definitions of European ethos share is the goal of assimilation, which Zygmunt Bauman shows to be a strong feature of modern European endeavours.<sup>37</sup> The opening up of a postmodern geography where space and places are shaped anew constitutes a major goal outlined by Bauman and other authors. Particularly Edward W. Soja conceives of postmodern geographies where essentialist endeavours are overcome

---

<sup>34</sup> As argued by Stråth, see footnote 3.

<sup>35</sup> Mommsen, Wolfgang, *Der europäische Imperialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Ritter, Gerhardt, *Europa und die deutsche Frage. Betrachtungen über das geschichtliche Eigenart des deutschen Staatsdenkens* (Munich: München Verlag, 1948), p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, *Moderne und Ambivalenz. Das Ende der Eindeutlichkeit* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1991), p. 226.

through a relentless cultural makeover of space.<sup>38</sup> Relativist readings of identity lay bare the clash between such essentialist endeavours and the ongoing transformations of European policies.

In an age of enhanced euro-global flows, the European Union is both the outcome and the (re-)creator of a European identity in which a relativistic strand has an important place. The very fact that the EU is negotiating Turkey's accession challenges essentialist concepts of European identity such as one based on the common Christian religious tradition. The accompanying relativism is also evident in European cutting-edge social policy concerning discrimination based on disability, age, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and belief. In the ensuing European identity, the essentialist norms and values of Christianity, health, adulthood, hetero-normative reproduction, rational masculinity, imperialist whiteness, and modern secular science are questioned in their supposed absoluteness as being actually relative to specific historical contexts of constructed purity which is subject to euro-global hybridization in the twenty-first century, making it necessary to recognize the relativity of norms and values. The absolutistic culture to which (the Christian) religion belongs is only one of the branches of the tree of European identity, of which another one is the culture of relativism.

While the next section expands on this introductory review of relevant philosophical and political debates about relativism as opposed to essentialism, what is still needed is an overview on the structure of this enquiry, to which we now turn. As shown in the debates reviewed in the next section, a relativist redefinition of European identity as situational otherness involves an openness to

---

<sup>38</sup> Soja, Edward W., *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso: London, 2001), p. 247.

and an understanding of Others within a variety of situations, which are divided into four main cases in the four analytic sections of this enquiry. Images of body and mind are examined in the section with an analysis of a novel by Luigi Pirandello and the one by Juli Zeh, along with two recent films on mental and physical disability by Ralf Huettner and Gianni Amelio. The rationale for choosing these four cases is that they allow for a closer look at their respective complementary themes and styles of madness, hygiene, outcasts, and disability. The following section builds on the previous one by shifting from body and mind to their activities, that is, work and play. This theme is explored with a novel by Hermann Hesse and one by Umberto Eco, as well as two recent films about generational change in work and play by Matteo Garrone and Michael Haneke. The complementary features of these four works are music, ecstasy, work, and teaching.

These two sections focus on the self side in the self-other divide, as they account for bodily and mental selfhood and its activities of work and play. The following two sections turn to the side of the Other, by focusing on social relationships and cross-cultural situations where differences come to the fore. Social relationships are crucial in the analysis of Ferzan Ozpetek's and Chris Kraus' films, along with the novels by Patrick Süskind and Isabella Santacroce. These works were chosen to take on board their hints at male queerness, female queerness, heteronormativity, and family bonds. To close this selection of situations where otherness takes shape through an engagement with cultural memory, the last analytic section turns to cross-cultural situations in two films by Giuseppe Tornatore and Fatih Akın, and two recent novels by Alessandro Baricco



and Günter Grass. These four texts provide complementary insights into foreignness, migration, belonging, and displacement. The conclusion expands on the links between these four kinds of situational otherness and their meaning for European identity.

While all films selected belong to the historical context of European integration and massive enlargement, two novels (by Pirandello and Hesse) are from the time of the German and Italian nationalist dictatorships, and two more (by Süskind and Eco) are from the Cold War years of West Germany and Italy siding with the bloc in favour of a capitalist free market. Their inclusion in this enquiry is meant to stress the focus on thematic and stylistic trends across different contexts, besides adding the dimension of nationalism and capitalism to this discussion on European identity. The final analytic section on cross-cultural situations takes on a yet stronger interest in recent years of European integration, with a view to accounting for enhanced migration and diversity.

## I. ESSENTIALISM AND RELATIVIST IDENTITIES

De lof der zotheid, de lof van carnaval zingt hij, die in de zotheid der burgers en op het carnaval der burgers de dichter heeft ontdekt. Want de zotheid en het carnaval werpen de starre gemeenplaatsen zorgeloos om, terwijl zij onmiddellijk nieuwe gemeenplaatsen van node hebben; zij spreken de gelijkenis van de betrekkelijkheid, maar tevens van de noodzakelijkheid der burgerlijke vormen.<sup>39</sup>

Folly and impurity aid cultural change. In European identity, health, and sex, impurity raises concerns – also in the Norwegian Islamophobic attacks, the London riots, and xenophobic nostalgias. Contamination and monstrous hybrids leave traumas. However, the novels *Saturday* by Ian McEwan, *Im Krebsgang* [*Crabwalk*] by the German Günter Grass, *Senza sangue* [*Without Blood*] by the Italian Alessandro Baricco, *Une forme de vie* [*Life Form*] by the Belgian Amélie Nothomb, or such films as those by the Dane Lars von Trier, display multiple meanings of difference. These and other literary and audiovisual works widen cultural memory to encompass mismorphy, that is, difference stigmatized and misconstrued, among others through monstrous attributes and grotesque features. Difference is cherished and relished in the tropes of fun and playful irony. The relativist identities displayed in these multifarious works challenge essentialism and fixed social constructs.

---

<sup>39</sup> ‘The praise of folly, the praise of carnival sings he who discovered the poet in the folly of the citizens and in the carnival of the citizens. For folly and carnival carelessly subvert stiff generalizing conventions, while immediately needing new such generalizing conventions; they tell the parable of the relativity of, yet also of the inexorable need for civic forms.’ Ter Braak, Menno, *Het Carnaval der burgers* (The Hague: 1934), p. 31. [unless otherwise indicated, all translations are written by the author of this enquiry]

Cultural identity and memory reflect the values and intentions of a collective entity. The European Union, reshaped by the massive enlargements and migratory flows of the first decade of the twenty-first century, faces the challenge of redefining its intents and accommodating different cultural perspectives among its citizens, while preserving what the EU Treaty calls in its first article the ‘cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe’.<sup>40</sup> European cultural identity has to be described in a way which facilitates the inclusion of otherness envisaged both in the project of European integration and, specifically, in European social policies against discrimination based on ethnicity, belief, citizenship, sex, gender, sexuality, health, and age. Openness to otherness and grotesque monsters reveals itself as a feature of European identity in texts which constitute a cultural memory encompassing a relativist awareness and understanding of identity and memory as contingent and socially constructed, rather than as eternal and given by either God or nature.

This awareness recognizes and values playful flexibility in redefining identity and memory, along with their authority and hierarchy of values and meanings revolving around the reproduction and survival of the status quo, so as to prevent the systematic exclusion of otherness, along with its potential for cultural change; on a philosophical level, it is a form of relativism which combines the negation of any universally absolute and essential values with the positing of intentions which are suitable to specific circumstances and open to change in different conditions. European relativism is *metousiastic* (from *ousia*, meaning *essence*), as it entails an overcoming of any essentialist distinctions

---

<sup>40</sup> *The Treaty on European Union* <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:0010:0041:EN:PDF> .

between the self and the other, which makes systematic exclusion impossible. This openness to mismorphous otherness is manifested in ironic and playful cultural texts, where attention is diverted from the solemn stability of reproduction and survival – evoked by the images of fight for sex and food – to the amusing transformation associated with the aesthetically re-elaborated fate of death, which involves change and cultural rebirth. The amusing feature exploited in these tropes is their mockery of social wishes. Metousiastic relativism centres on amusement, that is, fun in the diversion which diverts from stable memory and identity into the realm of otherness. Textually, relativism is manifested in the aesthetics of grotesque irony summoned by the aforementioned imageries of fight, death, and rebirth.

Though discussed here in relation to European cultures, metousiastic relativism is not presented as exclusively European. However, the history of European integration constitutes a fitting context to point out the part played by metousiastic relativism in cultural identity and memory. Historically, although this process amounts to a social construct understood differently in different contexts, European integration can be discussed as a project intended to react against the systematic exclusion which was possible in the imperialist policies officially condemned after the fall of Italian Fascism and German Nazism. Among the founding members of the European Union, Germany and its main former ally Italy are the centres of those cultural identities which had to abandon their previous extremely dominant essentialist definitions. The relationship between metousiastic relativism and European cultural identity may be discussed in an analysis of relevant texts, with a focus on those from modern and postmodern

Italy and Germany. The German and the Italian words for amusement or fun, that is, *Spaß* and *divertimento*, are both metaphors of movement, related to the expansion of space and the motion towards different places, respectively. This idea of playful and ironic motion lends itself to a contribution where European identity is deliberately displaced and drawn away from any essentialist definitions. The conception of metousiastic relativism is meant to display this motion of cultural memory and identity.

In what follows, the contention is that the relationship between *European identity and relativism*, examined with a focus on Italian and German novels and films, lends itself to a *postmodern critique* that explores *hybridity* and *transience* as crucial aspects in early twenty-first century Europe. The intellectual looseness with which relativism is constantly associated with nihilism in *global and local debates on identity* underscores the need to define a metousiastic form of relativism in opposition to both absolutist and nihilist essentialism. The present analysis discusses relativism and European identity in relation to *social markers of mismorphous otherness*, namely those subsumed in the macro-categories of health, age, gender, and ethnicity. Enhanced integration, social equality and migration are phenomena which have to be taken into account in a redefinition of European identity for the early twenty-first century.

*European cultural identity and metousiastic relativism*

Cultural texts are repositories both of essentialist metaphors of normative identities and of metaphors which exceed essentialist norms in unveiling them as contingent and transient. The present analysis of relativist metaphors of transience in literary and cinematic texts intends to point out the significance of metousiastic relativism in European cultural identity in a way which is complementary to existing research on European identity, literature, and cinema, so as to provide a contribution to the discussion of European identity and essentialism as relevant to global-local hybridity and the critique of modernity. Its semiotic approach focuses on the norms and values renegotiated in texts intended to represent and reflect upon the cultural conventions sanctioned in and through language and discourse. Its focus on German and Italian cases follows considerations offered both by Italy's and Germany's recent history of radical self-redefinition – which distinguishes them from the other EU founding members, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg – and by the latest enquiries on European identity, literature, and cinema, to which it is desirable to add a comparative analysis of relativist metaphors.

In discussions on European identity in the early twenty-first century, a central concern is the impact of the European Union on the creation of collective identities which transcend national borders. Based on a number of interviews to citizens across different member states, Richard Robyn argues that the EU 'has been surprisingly successful in its efforts to establish an identity that competes with [...] national ones'.<sup>41</sup> In cultural criticism, textual artefacts are examined as repositories of representations of and reflections on discourses of identity,

---

<sup>41</sup> Robyn, Richard, *The Changing Face of European Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 229.

otherness, and collective memory. The present analysis envisages exploring the discourses represented and reflected upon in literary and cinematic texts, so as to contribute to a redefinition of identity in a transnational context.

The quest for a European identity accommodating integration and global flows is motivated by the presence of numerous far right wing parties across EU members sharing little except for an accentuated xenophobia.<sup>42</sup> Outside of the political arena, in intellectual debates, European identity is often dismissed as an impossible substitute for national identities, which entails a fallacious use of standards drawn from national identities and inappropriately applied to the EU, as if this institution were comparable to a nation-state.<sup>43</sup> An alternative line of argument is that European identity allows both for further integration and for the preservation of cultural memory, unlike rigid national identities.<sup>44</sup> The present analysis follows the latter argumentation, in opposition to the former, as relativist metaphors of metousiastic transience remediate norms of identity in a manner which both cherishes cultural memory and points to the inclusion of otherness, by suggesting the relativity of norms to specific contingent contexts subject to change.

In particular, German and Italian respondents to research on European and national identities present a significant blend of openness to further integration and the development of multiple identities where national cultural memory is combined with transnational forms of identification. In Germany, '(n)o real obstacles seem on the horizon for further union movement from the perspective of

---

<sup>42</sup> Seward, Deborah, Fear of Foreigners Fuels Far Right, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (11<sup>th</sup> February 2000), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Vignon, Jérôme, Interview in *Carrefours* (December 1997), p. 11.

how people [...] identify their nation with Europe'.<sup>45</sup> As to Italians, they 'are attached to the idea of Europe, and [...] this is shown through a variety of possible European integrations', implying many possibilities for identification with a transnational notion of Europeanness.<sup>46</sup> It is worthwhile to focus on German and Italian texts, when addressing the same question with a semiotic approach.

One special feature of Germany and Italy in relation to European identity in the early twenty-first century is their position at the border between western and former communist countries. The research led by Ulrike Meinhof focuses exactly on border identities in this geopolitical region, with an emphasis on the implications for European identity.<sup>47</sup> As the eastern enlargement is one of the main concerns of the European Union in the early twenty-first century, with crucial repercussions on European identity, Italy and Germany are of special interest also due to their central position within an enlarged union of states. The discussion of European identity in border communities can be complemented by an analysis focused on modern and postmodern German and Italian texts where identity is represented as fluid.

---

<sup>45</sup> Colegrove, De Forest W., Steadfastly European? German (supra)national identity in a rapidly changing Europe, ed. by R. Robyn, *The Changing Face of European Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 132.

<sup>46</sup> Pitasi, Andrea, Marchionni, Michela, & Massoni, Maria Francesca, Italian multiple identities: the Italian perception of national and European belonging, ed. by R. Robyn, *The Changing Face of European Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 152.

<sup>47</sup> Meinhof's and her colleagues' research discusses specific border communities and their mutual relationships, see: Meinhof, Ulrike H., Migrating borders: an introduction to European identity construction in process, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 29-5 (2003), p. 782. For further details, see: Meinhof, Ulrike H. (ed.), *Living (with) Borders. Identity Discourses on East-West Borders in Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).



*Global-local hybrids in postmodern Europe*

What are hybrids? The debate is urgent in the ever more interconnected societies of the early twenty-first century:

[...] ils se comptent par milliers, par millions, et leurs nombre ne cessera de croître. « Frontaliers » de naissance, ou par les hasards de leur trajectoire, ou encore par volonté délibérée, ils peuvent peser sur les événements et faire pencher la balance dans un sens ou dans l'autre. Ceux parmi eux qui pourront assumer pleinement leur diversité serviront de « relais » entre les diverses communautés, les diverses cultures, et joueront en quelque sorte le rôle de « ciment » au sein des sociétés où ils vivent. En revanche, ceux qui ne pourront pas assumer leur propre diversité se retrouveront parfois parmi les plus virulents des tueurs identitaires, s'acharnant sur ceux qui représentent cette part d'eux-mêmes qu'ils voudraient faire oublier. Une « haine de soi » dont on a vu de nombreux exemples à travers l'Histoire [...].<sup>48</sup>

'Border-dwellers', or hybrids, are crosses of different entities, e.g., a mule is a cross between a horse and a donkey. Yet, actually, all entities are hybrids, in so

---

<sup>48</sup> 'they are thousands and millions, their number will not cease to grow. "Border-dwellers" by birth, chance, or deliberate choice, they can weigh on events and make the balance hang on one or the other side. Those amongst them who will be capable of fully taking on their otherness will soften the relationships between different communities and languages, by strengthening the connections within the societies where they live. In contrast, those who will not be capable of taking on their own otherness might end up as some of the most restless identity-thirsty murderers, hitting those who represent that part of themselves which they would like to erase from memory. A form of "self-hatred" which has seen many an example across History.' Maalouf, Amin, *Les identités meurtrières* (Paris: Grasset, 1998), p. 46.

far as everything is part of many other different things; in particular, a European citizen is part of many different groups simultaneously, despite the boundaries separating these different groups. While, under ordinary circumstances, multiple identities are arranged in a hierarchical fashion, conflicts of interests make them compete with each other. In fact, as soon as interests conflict with each other and it is necessary to take sides, single identities distinguished from each other by essentialist boundaries are affirmed by collective and individual memory, doing violence to all other features of one's distinctive individuality, as well as to the others from the opposite side of the relevant boundaries.

Dichotomous binaries pervade European cultures with extensively discussed relationships with the Bible which recur in all cultural forms. In fact, any act of communication is based on a selection sanctioning the inclusion of the message and the exclusion of anything exceeding the message, as implicit in the present semiotic analysis. In the early twenty-first century, global and local conflicts related to those hinted at in the passage above (border-dwellers vs. identity-thirty murderers) revolve around questions of cultural identity. The Islamist attacks in New York and other western cities, as well as western countries' military interventions in Islamic countries, ensue from the essentialist distinction between modern west and the rest. The awareness of hybridity, that is, of every entity's multiple memberships, often also across the boundary between the west and the rest, is crucial in discussions on global-local cross-fertilization. Within western communities, such social differences as gender, age, health, and class are crossed in hybrid textual combinations of privilege and discrimination

where literary and cinematic characters construct their identity and memory critically and creatively.

Essentialist boundaries between different forms of identity are considered with suspicion precisely due to the impossibility for anything like single, essential or pure identities to exist at all:

[...] een proces van onttovering [...] komt tot uiting in het verander(en)de karakter van culturele gemeenschappen: deelhebben aan een bepaalde cultuur is steeds minder eenduidig geworden, omdat de culturele kern van een gemeenschap alleen maar zuiver kan blijven bij volstrekt isolement. Van een dergelijk isolement kan in de hedendaagse fase van globalisering helemaal geen sprake meer zijn, maar de onttovering is in feite al begonnen aan het begin van het moderniseringsproces: modernisering en menging van gemeenschappen zijn altijd hand in hand gegaan.<sup>49</sup>

Paradoxically, modernity contributes to the hybridization involved in existence, as it generates increased contact between groups separated by essentialist boundaries, while also creating an essentialist separation from groups where values different from modern ones are cherished. On the one hand, global-local societies are marked by disenchantment with respect to essentialist boundaries. On the other hand, social distinctions always play an important part, as

---

<sup>49</sup> 'a process of disenchantment comes to expression in the changed and changing character of cultural communities: taking part in a specific culture has become ever less clear, as the cultural core of a community can remain pure only in perfect isolation. In the current phase of globalization such an isolation is not possible any longer; in fact, disenchantment began already at the start of modernization, which has always gone hand in hand with a blending of communities.' Koenis, Sjaak, *Het verlangen naar cultuur: Nederland en het einde van het geloof in een moderne politiek* (Amsterdam: van Genneep, 2008), pp. 272-3.

represented in the texts in discussion, which share the noteworthy feature of presenting multiply disadvantaged or privileged characters, e.g., not only as women, but also as elderly, detained, and low class.

Global-local hybridity, that is, the set of crosses between privileged and discriminated identities in the highly heterogeneous societies of the early twenty-first century, involves not only conflicts, but also possibilities:

Nella società della comunicazione generalizzata e della pluralità delle culture, l'incontro con altri mondi e forme di vita [...] significa fare esperienza della libertà come oscillazione continua tra appartenenza e spaesamento. È una libertà problematica, [...] facciamo fatica a concepire questa oscillazione come libertà: la nostalgia degli orizzonti chiusi, minacciosi e rassicuranti insieme, è sempre ancora radicata in noi, come individui e come società.<sup>50</sup>

The tension between the nostalgia for less diverse, or complex, societies, despite the disenchantment with essentialist boundaries, and the enjoyment of dangling between participating to and retreating from the diversity of global-local societies are characteristic of global-local hybrids. A textual analysis of the relationships between relevant literary and cinematic texts displays the empowering role of

---

<sup>50</sup> 'In mass-media-based and multicultural societies, the cross between different worlds and lifestyles [...] means an experience of freedom as a ceaseless dangling (or swinging, oscillation) between belonging and estrangement. It is a problematic freedom, [...] it is hard to conceive this dangling as freedom: nostalgia leads us back to enclosed, both threatening and reassuring horizons, both on the individual and the social level.' Vattimo, Gianni, *La società trasparente* (Roma: Garzanti, 1989/2000), pp. 19-20.

hybridity in European social groups, as represented across different art forms in aesthetic articulations which express a relativist stance.

### *Metousiastic relativism*

It is useful to identify the constant features of relativism as intended here, in an interpretation which is itself relative to the early twenty-first century issues related to euro-global flows; far from wishing to essentialize the many different forms taken on by relativism in so many different texts and contexts, its metousiastic form advanced here can be reduced to three main characteristics. Firstly, relativism restricts the validity of essentialist valuations to transient particular and situated perspectives demarcated by the experience of the body and society. In other words, moral and scientific valuations are not universal, but contingent upon the interests of their subjects, which undergo social and historical change in the transience of being. Secondly, relativism emphasises continuities in the transience of historical and cultural diversity. This implies that the same situation in which particular subjects construct themselves as such in relation to their interests returns in all periods and places without the possibility to identify a universally valid hierarchy of value. Although this might sound as yet another universal truth, it merely amounts to the observation of the contingency and transience of any norms and values based on an absolutist conception of truth.

Thirdly, and finally, relativism offers the possibility to overcome the norms of systematic exclusion inherent in cultural identity by fatalistically participating in the transience of being in a creative and critical manner. This means that, with the ironic awareness of the relativity of bodily and social experience to particular perspectives, it is possible to contribute to culture and change by criticizing essentialism through creative redefinitions of values and norms, which praise the value of what mainstream culture despises and dismisses as low and corruptive.<sup>51</sup> What is central here is the fatalist, yet far from passive embracement and praise of change itself, rather than any unchanging principle. This transcendence of normative identities offers a form of openness to and praise of change exceeding randomness, anarchy, and social instability, which are as self-referential as essentialist normativity. Metousiastic relativism encompasses a willingness to adapt hierarchies of value to ever different systems of reference, in contrast to both absolutist and anarchic claims to an immutable truth, whether of social stasis or of unruly agitation.

The three features listed can be condensed in a definition hinging upon the concept of transience, as opposed to the essentialist reliance on a stable ontology: *metousiastic relativism is the critical awareness and creative acceptance and praise of the recurring transience of experience*, where ‘critical awareness and creative acceptance’ stand for the third feature, ‘recurring’ for the second one, and ‘transience’ for the first one. As outlined, these main features are openness to

---

<sup>51</sup> In this enquiry, irony always refers to its classical understanding as something known by observers which agents are unaware of. In particular, observers of anti-essentialist and relativist critiques enjoy the irony of knowing that essentialist agents are trapped in normative perspectives of their own devising, which are proved to be incomplete and ineffective. See: Storey, I. C. and Allan, A., *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008, p. 125; Booth, W. C., *A Rhetoric of Irony*, University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 63.

change, an emphasis on transience as constant across different contexts, and the willingness to critically and creatively participate in the transience of being. Synthetically, metousiastic relativism criticizes and re-creates the values of reference, in embracing and praising the fate of transience. Thus defined, the ontological transience of relativism has the potential to overcome the essentialism which, with its ontological stability of eternal and unchanging natural essences to be served, has become problematic in the context of euro-global flows.

The relativist overcoming of essentialist boundaries is implied in the very etymon of hybridity, as can be formulated in Nietzschean terms. Although the Greek civilization marked a crucial point in the history of imperialism and ethnocentric distinction from all non-Greek peoples, Greek tragedies point to the centrality of transgression and subversion in this early European context. As in Greek tragedy, the hybrid overcomes the boundaries with the tragic force of hubris to move somewhere hyper, above and beyond the borders set, the limes, in a movement of *Überwindung* or sublimation, of *Umwertung* or trans-valuation, tending to the *Außermoralische* or the meta-moral. Hybridity is inherent in *hyparxe*, that is, in existence, where *hypar*, that is, dreaming illusions, moves ever *hyper* what is essentially defined as real, which is the set of dreams and illusions conventionalized as norms and values. As suggested in the Sanskrit adverb *upàri* with the meaning of over, existence unfolds in a continuous over-coming or sublimation of one illusion (*maya*) into another. Why is the hybrid relevant to the etymology of *hubris* and, therefore, of the preposition *over*? The answer lies simply in what hybrids do; all hybrids strive for, accomplish, and exemplify is the *hubris* of overcoming of boundaries, as in the works of fiction here examined.

With the sublimating power of imagination, it is possible to dream the fences of essentialist norms knowing that it is all a dream, in the metousiastic existential dimension of relativity. With its self-avowed and fatalistically loved impurity, hybridity questions all ethical norms and moral values supposedly derived from some absolute essence, in an open and ironic relativism.

*Relativism and essentialism for global-local identities*

The first decade of the twenty-first century ends with the renewed global angst of the conflict between the west and organized terrorism, which is associated with Islamic fundamentalism. The Detroit attack fuels the collective memory of the World Trade Center massacre, which marks indelibly the start of the century. The representation of identity is a subject of considerable significance to the theoretical and practical discussions of intercultural relations in a European Union which shares with America the hegemonic discourse of modernity. The ways in which the international situation is conveyed in the form of particular images of various kinds derive from and, in turn, contribute to both the definition of intercultural problems and the implementation of suitable measures. In relation to intercultural issues, the two philosophical positions between which discussions oscillate are essentialism and relativism, implying essential cultural differences and transient contingent distinctions, respectively. Identifying the essentialist and relativist aesthetics involved in the representation of identity may offer an appropriate contribution to a redefinition of European cultural identity in a global-local context.



Jean Baudrillard's phrase 'virtual violence of consensus', that is, liberalist consent as authoritarian and imperialist, is emblematic of the critical debates on the western ideal of modern democracy,<sup>52</sup> also marked by Zygmunt Bauman's disturbing suggestion that, in a liquid modernity, freedom can be a curse, rather than a blessing.<sup>53</sup> A liquid fear haunts the European in the form of a 'Titanic syndrome'.<sup>54</sup> Paradoxically, the ideal of freedom culminates in the compulsive phobia of the possible enemies of democracy. No wonder that Jürgen Habermas engaged intensively with the 'dialectic of the Enlightenment' revealed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's thesis that reason creates its own myth of demystification.<sup>55</sup> The celebration of rationality as the key to democratic freedom from the myths of morality and political absolutism, after all, was central in the compulsive destructivity of twentieth-century totalitarianism. In the twenty-first century, numerous cultural discourses stand out in the legacy of the Enlightenment. The narrative of a divided west,<sup>56</sup> consisting of a compulsively consumerist America and a critical Europe, displays the ambivalence of the Enlightenment culture, where critical reason and rational compulsion are inextricably bound to each other. The image of a homogeneous America<sup>57</sup> also hints at the compulsive rationality marking modern democracy. The European metaphor of American cultural erosion<sup>58</sup> and the critique of American neo-liberal

---

<sup>52</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), p. 84.

<sup>53</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment, in *The Frankfurt School*, ed. by J. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 38.

<sup>56</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, *The Divided West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, After the End of History, *Open Democracy Net* (2<sup>nd</sup> May 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Kroes, Rob, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 16.

imperialism<sup>59</sup> add to the problematic picture of the west originated from the Enlightenment.

The changing multicultural composition of European societies bears the problem of free speech in twenty-first-century Europe as Islam's frontier-zone.<sup>60</sup> Secular discourses such as the atheism implied in the heatedly debated Danish cartoons can be as intolerant as religious ones, as both religious and secular discourses can be emancipatory or oppressive depending on the circumstances: 'one of the more disturbing patterns of history is that movements that began as liberators end up becoming oppressors in their own right'.<sup>61</sup> Atheism has significance whenever it is critical of power and privilege, whereas the atheist cartoons attacked a stigmatized minority.<sup>62</sup> The conception of human rights as a protection for the powerless complicates further the articulation of the western accusations addressed to the traditional practices of Muslim minorities in western societies.<sup>63</sup> Muslims can be good citizens,<sup>64</sup> deserve respect and recognition,<sup>65</sup> and should engage in inter-religious dialogue,<sup>66</sup> without needing assimilation, according to some critics.

This valuation is in striking opposition to Francis Fukuyama's assimilationism,<sup>67</sup> implying the need for Muslims in western societies to serve the western rational essence before their traditional values. The underlying

---

<sup>59</sup> Nederveen Pieterse, Jan, *Neoliberal Empire, Theory, Culture, & Society* (2004), 21/3, p. 123.

<sup>60</sup> Sassen, Saskia, *Free Speech in the Frontier Zone*, *Open Democracy Net* (20th February 2006). Available at: [http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe\\_islam/freespeech\\_3282.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/freespeech_3282.jsp).

<sup>61</sup> McGrath, Alister, *The Twilight of Atheism* (London: Rider, 2004), p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 273.

<sup>63</sup> Ignatieff, Michael, *Human Rights as Idolatry*, in A. Gutman, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), p. 71.

<sup>64</sup> Carens, Joseph H., *Culture, Citizenship, and Community* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 160.

<sup>65</sup> Klausen, Jytte, *The Islamic Challenge* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 47.

<sup>66</sup> Ramadan, Tariq, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004), p. 201.

<sup>67</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *Europe vs. Radical Islam*, *Slate* (16th February 2006).

assumption is Samuel Huntington's popular thesis that there are distinct civilizations which are essentially different from each other, meaning that migrants have the duty to embrace the civilization of their host societies.<sup>68</sup> To put it in Bauman's terms, the question is that of how moral it is to expect of the Muslims in Europe to put western rationality at a higher level than their own self-responsibility.<sup>69</sup> This and related intercultural problems point to the inevitability of tension and the importance of coming to terms with something as omnipresent as conflict.<sup>70</sup> Assimilationism and its critics constitute two crucial positions in discussions on interculturality, the former tending to essentialism, while the latter entails the philosophical stance of relativism.

Relativism and nihilism are often confused in current debates such as that ensued from Ian Buruma's analysis of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh's murder by an Islamic fundamentalist. Buruma and his followers defended the anti-dogmatist interpretation of Van Gogh's Islamist murderer and his enlightened supporters Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Afshin Ellian as two different forms of the universal, either religious or secular.<sup>71</sup> Pascal Bruckner condemned Buruma's relativism, and preached the reform of Islam and the assimilation of the Muslims in Europe.<sup>72</sup> At this point, the whole diatribe took on a surprising and interesting turn. As a response to Bruckner's accusation of relativism, Buruma engaged in a passionate, almost desperate apology, in which he took decisively distances from

---

<sup>68</sup>Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Free Press, 1996/ 2002).

<sup>69</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 116.

<sup>70</sup> Gray, John, *Al Qaeda and What It Means To Be Modern* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> Buruma, Ian, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limit of Tolerance* (London: Penguin Press, 2006), p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> Bruckner, Pascal, Enlightenment fundamentalism or racism of the anti-racists?, *Sign and Sight* (24<sup>th</sup> January 2007).

relativism, and highlighted that his thesis is actually imbued with the same enlightened values as Ali and Ellian's, and even Bruckner's own, for that matter.<sup>73</sup>

On the one hand, such an uncourageous and defensive step back betrays a general negligence, encompassing also the accusing side, of the characteristically relativistic import of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, this intellectual exchange is blatantly marked by the uninformed, yet all-pervasive use of the label of relativism as a pseudo-euphemistic derogatory synonym of nihilism. Bruckner and Buruma tacitly agreed on the embarrassing confusion of relativism with nihilism. Brought to the fore by twenty-first-century multiculturalism, relativism actually shapes its meaning in contrast to monism, that is, in opposition to the essentialist ordering of reality based on one aspect which is supposed to be the essence of things.<sup>74</sup> While Bruckner conceives of modern rationality as the essence served by Van Gogh's supporters and missed by religious fundamentalists, Buruma suggests the relativity of reason to the western context, as rational critique results in a form of intervention similar to that of religious fundamentalism. The conception of a metousiastic form of relativism is intended precisely to take distances from the form of relativism which is too easily associated with nihilism. Metousiastic relativism is a crucial intellectual resource in the essentialist climate following the terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center.

The works by Samuel Huntington, Thomas W. Simons, and Bernard Lewis are central in the intellectual debates fuelled by the World Trade Center massacre. They share an implicit endorsement of the discourse of western

---

<sup>73</sup> Buruma, Ian, Freedom cannot be decreed, *Sign and Sight* (29<sup>th</sup> January 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Parekh, Bhikhu, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 11.

scientific and technological mastery. Huntington presents technology as the immediate 'source' of western expansion.<sup>75</sup> In this narrative, western expansion is implicitly associated with the image of a restless river running ever farther, as technology is metaphorically called its source. This discursive configuration positions technology at the origin of the historical process whereby the west has exerted its supremacy over the rest. In this sense, technology is appropriated as intrinsically western, namely as that one principal element of the west from whence western supremacy is derived. The historical clash between the Islamic and the western civilizations is linked to the fact that 'European innovations [...] enabled the Portuguese and then others to circumvent the Muslim heartland'.<sup>76</sup> This suggests again that modern technology is the distinguishing feature of western supremacy over Islamic culture.

In fact, Huntington's discourse presents technology both as the cause of and as the means for western supremacy over Islamic culture. The role of technology in Islamic cultures is marginalized. The ensuing imagery of otherness is one devoid of science and technology, which are the west's prerogatives. Unsurprisingly, the statement of a Muslim author that 'Islam must develop its own engineers and scientists' in order to emancipate from western hegemony is enshrined by Huntington as the emblem of Islamic opposition to the 'godless West'.<sup>77</sup> In the same vein as in Said's analysis of orientalism, this representation of the vision of the west entertained by Islamists can be seen as actually representative of a self-image of the west as uniquely scientific and

---

<sup>75</sup> Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Free Press, 1996/ 2002), p. 51.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 210.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214.

technological.<sup>78</sup> By commenting on a negative tone upon a statement where Islam is for once associated with science and technology, Huntington implicitly reasserts the discourse of science and technology as exclusively western. The prospect that Islam might develop ‘its own’ science and technology, then, can only be an irreducibly religious form of fundamentalism in Huntington’s discourse.

Religion is posited as central in Islamic culture. The narrative of the backward, a-scientific and non-technological non-west/Islam is, thereby, upheld. The imagery of the other lagging behind finds its place also in the discussion of the ‘war on terrorism versus air power’, which entails the deployment of ‘car bombs’ on the Islamic side and of ‘*smart* bombs’ (emphasis added) on the western side.<sup>79</sup> As soon as the west is confronted with Islamic military technology, the latter must be a *dumb*, backward arsenal for warfare. Even when Huntington touches on Islamic technology, its entity as proper technology is denied *tout court*; while the west dominates the skies with air technology, radical Islam disposes only on the primitive means of terror. In this discourse, the only real technology is, by definition, western.

Simons contributes to the 9/11-triggered debate in a concise analysis of ‘Islam in a globalizing world’ which is masterly condensed in its very last sentences:

Today’s challenges to our Muslim brothers and sisters and their children are great. Their [...] societies [...] are under huge structural pressures from

---

<sup>78</sup> Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

<sup>79</sup> Huntington, *ibidem*, p. 217.

IT-led globalization [...] But the opportunities are very great as well. It may now be possible to break free at last from the truncations and prevarications that were forced on Muslims and invented by Muslims [...] It may now be possible at last for Muslims to shape for themselves a modernity that is consonant with Islamic belief and Islamic authenticity [...] And [...] surely it is the Americans who are in the *best* position to understand and support the efforts of Muslims to fashion new and better lives for themselves *and* for us in this new phase of our life together on earth.<sup>80</sup> (emphases in the original)

Imbued with the Christian rhetoric of solidarity and brotherhood, Simons' discourse deploys a liberalist repertoire of 'challenges', 'opportunities', emancipation, and renewal, all Americanly 'great'. Although the ideal of brotherhood is central in Islamic discourses, too, this narrative is clearly used in a West-centric manner in this case, as the following concise analysis makes clear. At the centre of the passage shines the high note of democratic self-determinacy, immediately followed by the highlight of American aid. Islam can profit from globalization, whose leader is Information Technology. This glorious leader can free Muslims from their self-made 'truncations' to reconcile with the trunk from which they have severed themselves: modernity. Of course, the modernity at stake is one made to fit, as a mask, 'Islamic belief'; it is certainly not authentic, western modernity. This narrative is made possible and held together by the leader of

---

<sup>80</sup> Simons, Thomas W., *Islam in a Globalizing World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 68-9.

globalization: technology. Again, Islam is crystallized in a discursive frame of technological naivety, this time with the promise of western help to keep the pace.

In Lewis' discourse, science and technology are central in the reversal of the master-pupil relationship between Islam and the west.<sup>81</sup> In the story-line which he plots, science and technology are the protagonists. While pre-modern west used to be Islam's pupil, modern west has become Islam's master, as modern science and technology replaced the Islamic set of knowledge and equipment which used to be so precious also for the west. Western science was, then, admired by Islamists, but they eventually refused it.<sup>82</sup> This is 'what went wrong' in the ensuing inter-civilizational clash, as the title goes.

Huntington's, Lewis', and Simons' discourses are part of the modern ideological setting unmasked by John Gray in both the west and radical Islam and contrasted with a fatalistic scenario where conflicts are embraced as vital and ubiquitous.<sup>83</sup> Gray shows how, actually, radical Islam is not simply terror, but relies on cutting-edge modern technologies. This is in striking contrast to the discourses on modern west vs. traditional Islam just explored. These opposing positions are, respectively, essentialist and relativist in so far as, on the one hand, the discourse of western science and technology is based on a linear conception of time as tending to the realization of an essential ideal in progress, and, on the other hand, the narrative of conflict as omnipresent hinges on a cyclical conception of time as characterized by the recurrence of creativity and crisis.

---

<sup>81</sup> Lewis, Bernard, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002), p. 7

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>83</sup> Gray, John, *Al Qaeda and What It Means To Be Modern* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).



One relevant discussion, receiving much national and international attention in the Dutch political elections of spring 2010, is that of Muslim migrants in the Netherlands, who are perceived by the Party For Liberty (PVV) as a danger to the essentially Dutch equality of women and homosexuals.<sup>84</sup> This representation of global-local society in the Netherlands is marked by the essentialist distinction between modern Dutch citizens, associated with techno-scientific mastery by PVV especially in relation to their historical triumph over the dark natural force of the sea, and Muslim migrants, associated with a primitive techno-scientific competence which makes it possible for them to still regard women and homosexuals' social equality as unnatural. The narrative of gender and sexual equality as an essential feature of Dutch society threatened by Muslim migrants is founded on the association of Islam with primitiveness and blindness to sound facts, in striking and essential opposition to Dutch techno-scientific rationality, also presented as superior to other western variants by virtue of the Dutchman's unequalled mastery of the sea. In a Nietzschean scientific metaphor, Islamophobic Dutch citizens are affected by the organic disease of a desperate resentment against Muslim migrants who enjoy Dutch society's advantages without undergoing assimilation. In a Foucauldian technological metaphor, Muslim migrants in the Netherlands are subject to the technological mechanisms of a bureaucracy which regards their most intimate beliefs as abnormal.

In the discussion of European identity, these essentialist discourses can be opposed by an analysis of relativist representations of identity and memory in European cultures. Literary and cinematic representations of identity as relative to

---

<sup>84</sup> Wilders, Geert, *De agenda van hoop en optimisme* ([www.pvv.nl](http://www.pvv.nl), 2010), p. 14.

specific situations, rather than as eternal and immutable, offer a conception of identity which is open to change and the inclusion of otherness, as suitable for accommodating global-local hybridity in postmodern Europe. Far from suggesting yet another essentialist crystallization of what Europe should be, an analysis of relevant metaphors may describe metousiastic relativism as one aspect of European cultural identity which is particularly significant in the early twenty-first century.

#### *Health, age, gender and ethnic identities in European literature and cinema*

The present analysis intends to point out the role played by metousiastic relativism in European cultural identity by discussing the ironic ways in which grotesque literary and cinematic metaphors of transience evoke the relativity of essentialist norms of identity. In the historical context of enhanced integration, this subject is analysed with an intersectional sociological approach and a Nietzschean-Foucauldian philosophical orientation. As social intersections of conventional differences involve normative presuppositions, Nietzsche's and Foucault's critiques against morality and modernity offer a suitable theoretical framework. In traditional sociological paradigms, the four main axes of difference and identification are class, gender, age, and ethnicity. However, the centrality of health in the discourse of modernity and the all-pervasiveness of class identifiers

across literary and cinematic representations hint at a more appropriate matrix for this analysis, where the category of health replaces that of class, which, in turn, is examined throughout. With a critical approach indebted to Antonio Gramsci's attentiveness to hegemony,<sup>85</sup> the Frankfurt School, and French post-structuralism, class still plays a crucial role, although attention is shifted from the Marxian emphasis on the economic structure to the semiotic dynamics of cultural memory in the discourses of health, age, gender, and ethnicity. These categories serve the grotesque reduction of subjectivity to essences whenever social negotiation comes into play, whether in metropolises or in grottoes.

Whether in a grotto or in a metropolis, at some unique, macabre juncture of unfathomable spatio-temporal and socio-cultural circumstances, a subject is born. The question is if it looks normal, or if it is a little monster. This first, fundamental question is too ugly to be posed explicitly in all its disarming cruelty. Without waiting for this crude formulation, the answer springs from the tribal authorities, these institutional sources of wisdom; the shamans and great sorcerers secretly governing all societies, whether wearing their holy masks and painted feathers of class and caste privilege as religious ministers or as doctors devoted to the surreptitious mythology of institutionalized modern science and medicine. They are the class in charge of legitimating the irredeemably oppressive hegemony of the rulers, whether warriors, nobles, or entrepreneurs; the sacred task of their mask is to make official power look innocent and just, be it in spiritual or natural terms. All around the new-born reigns a silent anguish that can

---

<sup>85</sup> Ives, Peter, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

only be resolved through the socially constructed definition of the essential health identity of the new subject.

And on goes the grotesque subjectivating subjugation of the docile little body. All know what delightful circumcisions, what sweet infibulations, what lovely education and tacit indoctrination await both the little beauties and the little beasts. Shaped in the revolting rituals of tribal initiation, the little body is constructed as a voiceless infant whose worth is nothing without the horrendous theatre of normative family, first, and normative intersubjective relationships, then, in the course of the dark tunnel of spasmodic race euphemistically called adolescence. The sinister light that shines at the opposite side is reproductive sex and ethnic fight. This is the lugubrious doom of adult identity: to make more little beauties and beasts, and to destroy those from different little tribes, whether in grottoes or metropolises.

The following discussion zooms in, in turn, on health, age, gender and ethnic identities in European literature and cinema, at the specific spatio-temporal and socio-cultural juncture marked by the passage from modern to postmodern discourses of the grotesque in the European Union. Nevertheless, as is clear in the discussion, the texts examined are thus classified only based on their narrative emphasis and for analytical purposes, as intersections of social differences are pointed out in each part of the analysis. This particular structure allows for an outline of the rhetorical tropes of flux, ecstasy, eros, and hubris, respectively, where it may be possible to articulate the analysis of relevant metaphors of hybridity, otherness, and transience.

## II. THE METAPHOR OF FLUX AND HEALTH AS AN IDENTIFIER

The European Union of the early twenty-first century is seeking to define European identity in relation to enhanced integration, migration and the equality of youth, women, migrants, and other related disadvantaged groups. Age, gender and ethnic identities are rooted in the body. In terms of discursive hegemony, the historical triumph of modernity over morality brings with it the centrality of the body in relation to health and illness. The discursive intersections of health with adulthood, reproductive sexuality and racial purity highlight the centrality of the healthy body in modern Europe. Adulthood, sex, and ethnicity are each taken up in the three subsequent chapters, whereas this section delves into their common root of health as a normative discourse.

In contrast to the essentialist dichotomy between solid health and fluid illness, the healthy body entails a flux of interpretations and meanings, as soon as it is deconstructed from the stance of metousiastic relativism. Far from needing any unchangeable natural norms, the definition of health is relative to the temporary and subjective interpretations of the meanings and values involved in the body. A selection of relevant novels and films may suggest the significance of this awareness of health as cyclically constructed for the inclusion of otherness in European identity. The conception of health as a flux constitutes a crucial rhetorical trope.

Most notably, health is presented as historically contingent and socially constructed in the philosophical critique articulated by Michel Foucault.<sup>86</sup> The

---

<sup>86</sup> Bourgeault, Ivy Lynn, 'Sociological perspectives on health and health care', in Dennis Raphael, Toba Bryant & Marcia Rioux (eds.), *Staying Alive. Critical Perspectives on Health, Illness, and Health Care* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc, 2006), p. 49.

project of this French post-structuralist consists of a postmodern elaboration on the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, who was, in turn, strongly inspired by the reflections collected by Giacomo Leopardi.<sup>87</sup> As extensively discussed by Emanuele Severino, Leopardi denies all eternal and absolute principles for the first time in western thought.<sup>88</sup> Leopardi's and Nietzsche's body-rooted philosophy of limits and radical relativity constitutes the point of departure for the Foucauldian analysis of health discourses.<sup>89</sup> This critique against health as a solid and objective set of facts recurs in the theories of symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, feminism, and post-colonialism.

The sociologist Herbert Blumer defines symbolic interactionism as a theory of human behaviour as relative to the symbolic meanings emerged out of social interaction.<sup>90</sup> With this approach, Erving Goffman demonstrates the symbolic character of health and illness in the interactive institutionalization and stigmatization of the body of the patient,<sup>91</sup> and Jack Haas and William Shaffir reveal that healthcare professionals are trained to take on a *cloak of competence* to delude society into trusting their powers beyond their capacities.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, social constructionism argues that all supposedly objective facts are actually the outcome of interpretations constructed in social dynamics geared to political

---

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Werke in drei Bänden* (Kettwig: Phaidon, 1990), vol. 2, p. 51.

<sup>88</sup> Severino, Emanuele, *Cosa arcana e stupenda: L'Occidente e Leopardi* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1997/2006), p. 116.

<sup>89</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Pantheon, 1971); *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Pantheon, 1973); *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>90</sup> Jary, David, *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 509.

<sup>91</sup> Goffman, Erving, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City: Ancor, 1961); *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963).

<sup>92</sup> Haas, Jack, & Shaffir, William, 'The Professionalization of Medical Students: Developing Competence and a Cloak of Competence', *Symbolic Interaction* (1977), 1, pp. 71-88.

negotiation.<sup>93</sup> Irving Zola contends that illness is constructed as a fact, whereas it is a medical representation of reality.<sup>94</sup> Medicalization is described by Conrad and Schneider as conceptual reliance on the clinical vocabulary, institutional domination of healthcare professionals, and interactive subordination of patients.<sup>95</sup> Health is presented as contingent on ever-changing cultural values.

European discourses on health are led back to patriarchy and imperialism by feminist and post-colonial critics. Only as a cursory anticipation of the relevant enquiries into gender and ethnicity examined further in the present discussion, sexual reproduction and public hygiene are two striking cases in point. Robyn Rowland compellingly argues that reproductive technologies are not necessarily empowering for women.<sup>96</sup> The emphasis on sexual reproduction in modern medical conceptualisations of health signals the perpetuation of the social normalization of women's bodies as essentially made for procreation. Western medicine revolves around discourses of masculinity and power that converge in the public commitment to hygiene and cleanliness. As thoroughly assessed by Alison Bashford, public health is 'an important part of the modern projects of nation, of race and of colonization'.<sup>97</sup> The ideal of solid, strong health is discursively instrumental to that of heteronormative masculinity and western imperialism.

---

<sup>93</sup> Berger, Peter L., & Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>94</sup> Zola, Irving, 'Medicine as an Institution of Social Control: The Medicalization of Society', *The Sociology Review* (1972), 20(4), pp. 487-504.

<sup>95</sup> Conrad & Schneider, *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>96</sup> Rowland, Robyn, *Living Laboratories: Women and Reproductive Technologies* (Sydney: Pan MacMillan Publishers Australia, 1992), p. 285.

<sup>97</sup> Bashford, Alison, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 189.

This section expands on the alternative concept of health as a flux of interpretations and meanings by closing up on textual representations of estrangement from mental sanity in the novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila* by Luigi Pirandello, terrorism against medical control in the novel *Corpus Delicti* by Juli Zeh, and difference from medical standards of normality in the films *Le chiavi di casa* by Gianni Amelio and *vincent will meer* by Ralf Huettner. Comparisons with relevant texts by Albert Camus, Ian McEwan, and Alejandro Amenábar allow for consideration of relevant representations of health from the (post-)colonial societies of France, Britain, and Spain, which bear striking similarities to those from the (post-)fascist societies of Italy and Germany. While Pirandello's and Camus' novels introduce the imagery of flux in its implications for health, ethnicity, and class, the other texts delve into aspects more specific to health.

### *Pirandellian Bodies*

Luigi Pirandello was doomed to relativism by the very telling name of the Sicilian property where he was born in 1867, called Chaos. The intertextual relationships between his work and postmodernism mark him as an appropriate point of departure in this connection.<sup>98</sup> At the age of twenty he moved to Rome to study at university, leaving behind him the absolute values of the traditionally conservative and static milieu of Sicily, and embracing the rebellion against

---

<sup>98</sup> Zangrilli, Franco, *Pirandello postmoderno?* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2008).



Italian society, which he regarded as corrupt.<sup>99</sup> After a tension with a professor, he moved to Germany to complete his studies at the University of Bonn and enjoy a purer life than in Italy, featuring an authentic love relationship as opposed to the money-focused marriage in Sicily two years later. Settled in Rome, the couple bore the sign of incommunicability, as Pirandello's wife suffered from a mental illness. Only through art could the writer sublimate his daily tragedy.

Pirandello's devotion to literature was unconditional; this, along with his German, European education, made to it that his career as a playwright acquired an international, European dimension. His warning 'not to touch the delicate tissue of the human soul in a coarsely dogmatic and blind manner' was recognized with the Nobel-prize for literature which he won.<sup>100</sup> His ascent inevitably took place under the long, sharp shadow of fascism, to which he adhered. On the one hand, this gave him the chance to rebel against the corruption of the pre-fascist Italian governments, and, on the other hand, the relations with Mussolini's absolutism were an opportunity to give more or less free expression to his innate relativism while enjoying the protection of the regime.<sup>101</sup> Pirandello's stance vis-à-vis the regime was always ambiguous, as his art never indulged in propaganda and the government, in turn, used to look at him with suspicion. His commitment to fascism was half-hearted and marked by many a contradiction, exactly as with the society that he criticized in his work.

Fascism and its positing of essentially defined identities are central in the literary and philosophical works by Albert Camus. In spite of the apparent conflict

---

<sup>99</sup> Lugnani, Lucio, *Pirandello. Letteratura e teatro* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1970), p. 16.

<sup>100</sup> Hallström, Per, *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1934*, speech available at: [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1934/press.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1934/press.html) .

<sup>101</sup> Bonghi, Giuseppe, *Biografia di Luigi Pirandello* (1996), <http://www.classicalitaliani.it/pirandel/bio/biopirandello05.htm> .

between Pirandello's adhesion to fascism and Camus' outspoken commitment against it, their texts share a sharp critique against the conventional norms which crystallize identity. This metousiastic critique is conveyed through relativist metaphors by both authors, in a way which has a particular significance in a redefinition of European identity which comes to terms with the memory of fascism. Camus' focus on alienation is particularly relevant to globalization and the redefinition of nation states in the twenty-first century.<sup>102</sup> The Camusian reflection on existence is all but untimely. Indifference is represented as the existential chance of the stranger to social conventions.<sup>103</sup> Within the system of formal relations of identity and distinction established in society, the estrangement from conventional values constitutes a dimension of indifferent participation to the community.

Alienation is the condition which ensues from the estranging awareness of social absurdity.<sup>104</sup> The feeling of being an alien pervades Camus' novels, with the insistence on the characters' irredeemable otherness as perceived in their social and cultural environment. Both metaphysical and social absurdity characterize the Camusian conception of existence.<sup>105</sup> While the notion of social absurdity refers to the awareness of the conventionality of social relationships, absurdity virtually precedes the establishment of society, as existence itself does not involve any intrinsic meaning whatsoever. Meaninglessness is the condition

---

<sup>102</sup>Margerisson, Christine, Orme, Mark, & Lincoln, Lissa, *Albert Camus in the 21st Century: A Reassessment of his Thinking at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2008)

<sup>103</sup>Zima, Pierre V., *Der gleichgültige Held. Textsoziologische Untersuchungen über Camus, Moravia und Sartre* (Stuttgart: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2004).

<sup>104</sup>Sändig, Brigitte, 'Zwei oder drei Fremde: Berührungspunkte zwischen Camus' *L'Étranger* und Christoph Heins' *Der fremde Freund*', in *Die Gegenwart des Absurden*, ed. by Annemarie Pieper (Tübingen: Francke, 1994), 37-52.

<sup>105</sup>Henry, Patrick, "Variations of absurdity", *Philosophy Today*, 19 (1975), 358-68.

against which the Camusian perspective rebels. Strangeness offers the key to the transfiguration of the absurd into the revolt.<sup>106</sup> The awareness of meaninglessness in existence and society bears the power to impose one's own meaning upon reality.

The novel *L'Étranger*'s formal setting and its political context are two aspects which have earned great attention. The stranger's Dark Continent<sup>107</sup> evokes countless associations and connotations related to otherness and alienation. In the text, the colonial scenery becomes the stage where the spectacle of absurdity unfolds before an ever more estranged audience, invited to identify with the narrator's alienated perspective. The sun<sup>108</sup> plays an important role in the novel, as well as in all of Camus' works. Along with sea and sand, the sun provides the pivotal point for the setting up of a Mediterranean imagery of simplicity, where meaninglessness shines and reaches the stranger as in a revelation. With the novel's minimal style,<sup>109</sup> Camus channels the image of Mediterranean simplicity into the dry description of absurdity. Different points of view cross in the novel's rendering of the absurdity of social conventions. The characters' encounters are haunted by the imperial gaze as male,<sup>110</sup> in the intricacies of the colonial relationships. Masculinity marks the absurdity of social

---

<sup>106</sup> Abbou, André, "Le quotidien et le sacré: introduction à une nouvelle lecture de *L'Étranger*", in *Albert Camus: oeuvre fermée, oeuvre ouverte?* ed. by Raymond Gay-Crosier and Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, Cahiers Albert Camus 5 (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 231-65.

<sup>107</sup> Margerrison, Christine, "The Dark Continent of Camus's *L'Étranger*", *French Studies*, 55 (2001), 59-73.

<sup>108</sup> Kemmer, Ernst, ed., *Lektüreschlüssel. Albert Camus, "L'Étranger"* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004) and Fleischer, Margot, *Zwei Absurde: Camus' "Caligula" und "Der Fremde"* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998).

<sup>109</sup> Kamden, Pierre Eugène, "La minimalité dans *L'Étranger*", *Revue électronique internationale de sciences du langage*, 3 (2003), 37-52

<sup>110</sup> Heggoy, Alf, "Cultural disrespect: European and Algerian views on women in colonial and independent Algeria", *Muslim World*, 62 (1972), 321-35

relations precipitating the revolt of the novel's tragic hero, who is ultimately a stranger to the world and to himself.

The right of the *pied-noir* to be heard<sup>111</sup> underpins the political context of colonial Algeria. The tensions between western colonizers and African colonized in French Algeria are ubiquitous. Political moderation<sup>112</sup> is the stance underlying the sense of absurdity conveyed in the novel. As colonial conventions, social relations, and existence itself disclose their meaninglessness, the politics of revolt involve an estrangement from all conflicting positions, in a form of participation based on mutual recognition and on the ultimate acceptance of otherness. The discourses of western superiority and French nationalism are demystified, as disillusionment with assimilation<sup>113</sup> pervades the colony's literary picture. Moral and political dialogue<sup>114</sup> is the key to the political ideal implied. Hospitality of the poor<sup>115</sup> as a Mediterranean tradition constitutes an additional topical feature of the colonial context. In all of these ways, French Algerianness<sup>116</sup> is a central theme emerging from the novel's representation of colonial issues. The relativist awareness derived from colonial hybridity questions all schemes of normality, which are criticized in Pirandello's texts, as well.

---

<sup>111</sup>McCarthy, Patrick, "The 'pied-noir' story", *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 June 1994, 26

<sup>112</sup>Marlière, Philippe, "Camus against the Tide: Algeria and the Intellectual Doxa", in *Constructing Memories: Camus, Algeria and "Le Premier Homme"*, ed. by Peter Dunwoodie and Edward J. Hughes, 42-51

<sup>113</sup>Hargreaves, Alec G., "Camus and the Colonial Question in Algeria", *Muslim World*, 77 (1987), 164-74

<sup>114</sup>Daniel, Jean, "Une patrie algérienne, deux peuples...", *Études méditerranéennes*, 7 (1960), 19-24

<sup>115</sup>Carroll, David, "Camus's Algeria: birthrights, colonial injustice, and the fiction of a French-Algerian people", *Modern Language Notes*, 112 (1997), 517-49

\_\_\_\_\_, "The colonial city and the question of borders: A. Camus's allegory of Oran", *Esprit créateur*, 41 (2001), 88-104

<sup>116</sup>Apter, Emily, "Out of Character: Camus's French Algerian Subjects", *Modern Language Notes*, 112 (1997), 499-516

A monumental analytic work about the complex dialectics between absolute and relative in Pirandello's *Weltanschauung* has already been erected by Vincenzo Crupi,<sup>117</sup> as relativism is indisputably 'a leading aspect of his art'.<sup>118</sup> As regards the critics abroad, Harold Bloom went so far as to situate Pirandello in the Sicilian historical tradition dating back to Empedocles and link him with Gorgias' ability to 'enchant the audience into a realization of the antithetical nature of all truth'.<sup>119</sup> The *summa* of Pirandello's conception of life, as well as of his own life, is his last novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila*. In this novel, the game of fallacious appearances in which the character deconstructs reality and his own beliefs makes him realize that everyone is alone in so far as the image that one envisages of oneself does not correspond to the pictures of one's self imagined by the others. This narrative zoom on estrangement makes a comparison between the Italian and the French novel particularly interesting. While the former emphasizes the social construction of mental illness (and class), the latter unveils the contingency of normal mental health.

The narrator of the enthralling monologue that unfolds in Pirandello's novel, Moscarda, is awoken from the slumber of daily routine when, one day, while he is looking in the mirror, his wife makes him gain awareness of a meaningless imperfection on his face that he had never noticed before, himself.<sup>120</sup> This sudden discovery leads to the thought that for the others he is not what he has envisaged being. Hence, he doubts the unity of his identity and discovers the

---

<sup>117</sup> Crupi, Vincenzo, *L'altra faccia della luna. Assoluto e mistero nell'opera di Luigi Pirandello* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1997).

<sup>118</sup> Licastro, Emanuele, 'Vincenzo Crupi. L'altra faccia della luna', *Book Reviews* (1999), 33/2, pp. 602.

<sup>119</sup> Bloom, Harold, *Luigi Pirandello* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), quoted in Lepschy, Anna Laura, 'Luigi Pirandello', *Modern Language Review* (1991), 86/1, p. 224.

<sup>120</sup> Pirandello, Luigi, *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1926), p. 17. Further references are given in the text.

presence of a stranger in himself, namely the image of his self pictured by the others (p. 27). His existential drama complicates as he makes the additional discovery that his identity entails hundred thousand, innumerable selves in the eyes of the others and even of himself, so that he is actually one and, yet, no one, a shapeless mask that takes on the shape of the face that wears it.

The very title *one, no one and a hundred thousand* is the key to the process taking place in the character's consciousness, shifting from an absolute idea of identity through a nihilistic one to, finally, relativism:

Voi credete di conoscervi se non vi costruite in qualche modo? E ch'io possa conoscervi, se non vi costruisco a modo mio? E voi me, se non vi costruite a modo vostro? Possiamo conoscere soltanto quello a cui riusciamo a dar forma. [...] [E] io non mi riconosco nella forma che mi date voi, né voi in quella che vi do io; e la stessa cosa non è uguale per tutti e anche per ciascuno di noi può di continuo cangiare [...]. Eppure non c'è altra realtà fuori di questa, se non cioè nella forma momentanea che riusciamo a dare a noi stessi, agli altri, alle cose.<sup>121</sup> (p. 59)

The individual here conceives knowledge of reality and reality itself in the terms of the European relativism initiated by Protagoras' and Gorgias' sophism and culminated, at the time of Pirandello, in Nietzsche's perspectivism. It is only

---

<sup>121</sup> 'Do you all believe you know yourselves without constructing yourselves in a particular fashion? And that I can know you without constructing you in my way? And you me, without constructing me in your way? We can only know that to which we are able to give a shape, and I do not recognise myself as the shape that you give me, nor do you as that which I give you, and one and the same thing is not the same for everyone and can endlessly change in the eyes of each one of us. And yet there is no reality other than this, that is, the momentary form which we manage to impose on ourselves, the others, and all things.'

possible to acquire knowledge of one's and the others' selves by constructing them in a fashion that depends on, is relative to the subject and the circumstances. There exists no other reality than the *temporary form* that one gives oneself, the others and the things crowding the world. This is the final stage of the evolution of the tormented self in the novel.

This process of self-doubt and alienation manifests itself in actions that can only be constructed as madness by society. In his existential malaise, the character wants to literally capture and escape from himself (p. 31), and destroy the image of himself held by the others in all possible bizarre ways (p. 38), including talking with animals (p. 124) and the donation of his property to the poor, which convinces everyone around him that he has completely lost his mind (p. 118). His nihilistic alienation finally gives way to relativistic sublimation. Ended up in a countryside hospice, Moscarda gives up any attempt to crystallize his identity in a definite form and opens up to the ever-changing possibilities of life, as lucidly expressed in the last words of the novel: 'I no longer have this need (to think about death and to pray), for I, myself, die every minute and am reborn anew and with no memories: alive and whole, not any longer in me, but in everything outside' (p. 190).

By contrast, *L'Etranger* offers a picture of the complex dialectics between the nation and the critic in the protagonist Meursault. The stranger is an alien to the nation's conventions of family, work, love, friendship, and civility. Meursault's estranged indifferent participation in his mother's funeral, his career's advancement, his lover's wishes, his friends' immorality, and his murderous act and legal prosecution, as well as his imprisonment and sentence to death, displays

the signs of the critic's solitary estrangement from the national collective. Strangeness constitutes the existential condition of *alieNation* as a lonely escape from the absurd alienation of the nation. This pun indicates that national discourses alienate one group of people – that is, the nation – from all others. While the other characters are alienated in the compulsive conformation to national norms, the stranger is an alien engaging in the impulsive adaptation to social situations.

The stranger to the nation has at his disposal the awareness of the merely representational character of the conventional norms and values sanctioned in the nation, the rigidity of which is absurd in that it misses the nation's very own goal of flexible adaptation. Instead of conforming to the standardized representations of social conventions, the stranger adapts to each situation with suitably flexible representations, overcoming the paradox of the nation. Meursault's status as a *pied-noir* presents the potential of hybridity which he fulfils as an alienated stranger. As a hybrid somewhere between the normality of his daily routine as a French Algerian and the deviancy of his indifferent behaviour, he transcends the dichotomies of social organization, in general, and of imperialist nationhood, in particular.

The overcoming of nationhood is a tragic endeavour ending in Meursault's death sentence. While rebelling against the sacredness of nationhood, the stranger realizes a revolt which is, again, sacred according to the utterances deployed in his own narrative, that is, carrying both the blessing of overcoming nationhood and the curse of the estrangement from the nation's strict laws. The novel's renegotiation of French Algerian cultural memory represents strangeness as the



flexibly adaptive revolt which rebels against the absurdly dualist representations of nationhood and fatally falls victim to its own alienation. The stranger transcends the social absurdity of nationhood only to fatalistically embrace the metaphysical absurdity of the limitedness and meaninglessness of existence. The outcast's love of existence as meaningless as it is characterizes the alienation from the nation's deceptive representations of such supposedly deeper meanings of existence as social justice and divine goodness.

The dry landscape of the French nation's colony provides the setting of Meursault's estranging alienation, as is evident in his account of his absurd transgression of the colonial nation's ultimate taboo, that is, the murder of an Arab:

C'était le même soleil que le jour où j'avais enterré maman [...]. A cause de cette brûlure que je ne pouvais plus supporter, j'ai fait un mouvement en avant. [...] Et cette fois, sans le soulever, l'Arabe a tiré son couteau qu'il m'a présenté dans le soleil. La lumière a giclé sur l'acier et c'était comme une longue lame étincelante qui m'atteignait au front. [...] Cette épée brûlante rongait mes cils et fouillait mes yeux douloureux. C'est alors que tout a vacillé. La mer a charrié un souffle épais et ardent. Il m'a semblé que le ciel s'ouvrait sur toute son étendue pour laisser pleuvoir du feu. Tout mon être s'est tendu et j'ai crispé ma main sur le revolver. La gâchette a cédé, j'ai touché le ventre poli de la crosse et c'est là, dans le bruit à la fois sec et assourdissant, que tout a commencé.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> 'It was the same sun as the day when I buried my mom. Due to this burning feeling that I could not bear any longer, I made a move forward. And this time, without raising it, the Arab showed me

Meursault's murder marks the peak of his estrangement. The central opposition is between the absurdity of his act, echoed in the dry land, and the set of cultural meanings involved in the pied-noir's murder of an Arab in French Algeria. The mnemonic recurrence of his mother's funeral through the image of the burning sun establishes a link between his awareness of social absurdity and his ultimate discovery of existential absurdity. At his mother's funeral, Meursault does not cry, as he realizes that, beyond the social implications of his parent's death, the tragic event actually amounts to the inevitable closure of the happiest time in his mother's life, characterized by her enjoyment of authentic relationships transcending social conventions. He is aware of the absurdity of the social imperative to express publicly any sentiment of grief. As the dry landscape suggests, meaning is only constructed in society, which leads to paradoxical situations when conventions do not suit specific circumstances. In the reiteration of sun, sand, and sea, in the scene of Meursault's murder, social absurdity radicalizes in existential absurdity, as soon as the conventional meanings around the hierarchical worth of pied-noirs and Arabs are perceived as absurd, meaningless, or dry, as the sunny landscape.

In the imperialist discourse of French nationalism in Algeria, the colonists define their worth in relation to the colonized, who are conceptualized as inferior, child-like, and, hence, needing the colonizers' protection. Subsequently, a pied-

---

his knife in the sun. The light reverberated on its steel, and it was like a long glowing cut on my forehead. This burning sword was whipping my lashes and my aching eyes. It is in that moment that all trembled. The sea carried a thick and firing breath. It seemed to me as if the sky was opening wide to make fire rain down. My whole being stretched and I closed my hand on my revolver. The trigger yielded, I touched the gun's clean belly, and it is then, in that noise both dry and deafening, that it all began.' Camus, Albert, *L'Etranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 53. Further references are given in the text.

noir's unreasonable murder of an Arab implies the loss of his privilege as a representative of the dominant social class, as well as of the French nation in the colony. Meursault does not share in the nationalist discourse. As symbolized by the dry landscape, he perceives existence as ultimately absurd, devoid of the cultural meanings of worth and privilege sanctioned in national identity. The transgression of the taboo of human life is a hyperbolic literary image conveying the stranger's critical overcoming of ideology.

Meursault's identity transgresses the social expectations derived from the nation's norms of language, class, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, health, and age. The minimalist style distinguishing his narration criticizes the rhetorical use of language which is typical of the ideological discourse of nationalism. His aloofness from his potential career advancement hints at his estrangement from the social system. His gender performance does not quite conform to his male sex, as his passivity vis-à-vis his girlfriend characterizes him as androgynous, rather than masculine in the heteronormative sense. His French ethnicity is frustrated by his irresponsible conduct, culminating in the murder of an Arab, which lowers his civic status to that of a detainee in prison, first, and a sentenced to death, in the end. His apparent normal health condition aggravates his deviancy from social norms, as no mitigating circumstances subsist. Finally, this is also the case with his adulthood, implying higher social expectations than with children or the old and disabled. His intersectional identity presents a monstrous hybridity which arouses the nation's pitiless thirst for retaliation. Rebellious to national compulsion, his alien national impulse is demonized, as his

sentence to death is directed more against his failure in shedding any tears at his mother's funeral, than against his murderous act.

It is precisely in the liminal condition marking the character of Meursault that Moscarda's estrangement is echoed. The two characters are complementary, as Moscarda is regarded as mentally ill, while Meursault provokes the community's indignation exactly due to his normal mental health. Significantly, both the Sicilian and the Algerian setting lend themselves to a highly symbolic use of the contrast between light and darkness. While this is a recurring motif in *L'Etranger*, light evokes an unrepeatable epiphany in *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, when Moscarda faces his friend's indignation at his mad behaviour, in book V, section VIII:

Gli vidi congiungere le mani in atto di preghiera: «Ma si può sapere almeno perché? Così da un momento all'altro?» Ebbi, vedendolo in quell'atto, come una vertigine. D'improvviso avvertii che spiegare lí per lí a lui e a mia moglie [...] i motivi di quella mia testarda risoluzione, di tanta gravità per tutti, non mi sarebbe stato possibile. Quei motivi, che pur sentivo in me aggrovigliati in quel momento e sottili e contorti dai lunghi spasimi delle mie tante meditazioni, non erano piú chiari del resto neanche a me stesso, strappato dalla concitazione dell'ira a quella terribile fissità di luce che folgorava tetra da quanto avevo cosí solitariamente scoperto: tenebra per tutti gli altri che vivevano ciechi e sicuri nella pienezza abituale dei loro sentimenti.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> 'I saw him join his hands in prayer: "Can't you at least tell us why? Without any design?" As I saw him begging me, I got kind of dizzy. Suddenly, I realized that I could not explain to him and

Moscarda's awareness of social absurdity is accompanied by an ecstatic effusion of light, exactly as with Meursault's. Ironically, the seemingly clear purposes guided by conventional norms are associated here with the darkness and blindness where those around Moscarda are prevented from seeing the relativity of existence.

*Uno, nessuno e centomila* is the 'vademecum of the perfect Italian [...] the novel [...] on the thousand truths of a people with no truth, the poetic fairy tale and the masked ball of Italian identity'.<sup>124</sup> I will go so far as to claim that it is actually the vademecum of the perfect European. The dizzy game of multiple identities is the source of existential angst and, at the same time, a way out of it, a typically Italian device to face it. The identity vivisected under the microscope of Pirandello encompasses, yet, more humanity than that enclosed within the narrow boundaries of Italy. Far from identifying with the local and national reality that he criticized, Pirandello embraced Europe in his fundamental encounter with Germany, which broadened his intellectual horizons to such an extent that his literary works do reflect a wider, European identity. This is in striking contrast with the writer's position in Fascist Italy, where his work counters nationalist rhetoric and discourse. The striking parallels between *Uno, nessuno e centomila* and *L'Etranger* show that, far from being instrumental to the nationalist discourse

---

my wife the causes of my stubborn resolution and so much concern for all. Those motives, which still I felt woven in me and thin and intricate with the prolonged spasms of my countless meditations, were not any more clear to myself, as I was torn by furious rage and by the tremendous fixity of light sinisterly irradiating from my so solitary discovery: darkness for all the others living blind and safe in the habitual fullness of their feelings.'

<sup>124</sup> Merlo, Francesco, 'Prefazione' in Pirandello, Luigi, *ibidem*, p. 7.

of Italian Fascism, Pirandello's work criticizes essentialist conceptions in a way akin to the avowedly anti-nationalist metaphors from Camus' oeuvre.

The overcoming of national conventions becomes evident in the elaboration on estrangement provided by *L'Etranger*. Meursault rebels against the national system sanctioned in bureaucracy and religion, as both the modern state's laws and traditional morality define justice in the nationalist dualist terms of worthy insiders and worthless outsiders. Conformation to social norms is a form of compulsion from the stranger's perspective, as evident in the scene with the priest in prison:

Il n'était même pas sûr d'être en vie puisqu'il vivait comme un mort. Moi, j'avais l'air d'avoir les mains vides. Mais j'étais sûr de moi, sûr de tout, plus sûr que lui, sûr de ma vie et de cette mort qui allait venir. ... Rien, rien n'avait d'importance et je savais bien pourquoi. Du fond de mon avenir, pendant toute cette vie absurde que j'avais menée, un souffle obscur remontait vers moi à travers des années qui n'étaient pas encore venues et ce souffle égalisait sur son passage tout ce qu'on me proposait alors dans les années pas plus réelles que je vivais.<sup>125</sup> (p. 66)

The stranger is aware of how vain bureaucratic and religious forms of organization are, as existence does not have any intrinsic meaning. In this light,

---

<sup>125</sup> 'He was not even sure of being alive, as he lived as a dead. As to me, I looked helpless. But I was sure about me, sure about everything, more sure than he, sure about my life and about this forthcoming death. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I sure knew why. From the bottom of my future, during the course of all this absurd life that I had led, a dark breath would rise towards me across years not yet come, and this breath would show on its way the vanity of everything that came my way back then in the nevermore real years that I was living.'

the priest represents the absurdity of ascetic conformation to a discipline based on a transcendent meaning of life. Paradoxically, the stranger sentenced to death is more alive than the compassionate priest exactly by virtue of his awareness of existential absurdity. In the symbolic setting of the nation's disciplinary power, that is, in prison, the encounter points also to social absurdity, where not having cried at one's parent's funeral is considered to be more abominable than having killed a member of society.

The stranger's revolt is echoed poetically in the novel's ending:

Des bruits de campagne montaient jusqu'à moi. Des odeurs de nuit, de terre et de sel rafraîchissaient mes tempes. La merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi entrainait en moi comme une marée. A ce moment, et à la limite de la nuit, des sirènes ont hurlé. Elles annonçaient un départ pour un monde qui maintenant m'était à jamais indifférent. [...] Là bas, là bas aussi, autour de cet asile où des vies s'éteignaient, le soir était comme un trêve mélancolique. Si près de la mort, maman devait se sentir libérée et prête à tout revivre. Personne, personne n'avait le droit de pleurer sur elle. Et moi aussi, je me suis senti prêt à tout revivre. Comme si cette grande colère m'avait purgé du mal, vidé d'espoir, devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde. De l'éprouver si pareil à moi, si fraternel enfin, j'ai senti que j'avais été heureux, et que je l'étais encore. Pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul, il me restait à souhaiter qu'il y ait

beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu'ils m'accueillent avec des cris de haine.<sup>126</sup> (p. 67)

The image of the indifferent night evokes again that of the dry sunny landscape of estrangement, this time not in reiteration, but in the contrast. The stranger's revolt is equaled oxymoronically to the 'wonderful peace' of indifference. In the monstrous hybridity of his intersectional identity, Meursault embraces the meaninglessness of existence by rebelling against the norms and values sanctioned in the national discourse of the French colony.

The novel's representation of French Algerian nationhood is a dialectical one. The nation takes shape only in relation to the encounter between the national self and its other. The notion of humanity acquires a meaning only in the violence on and humiliation of the others, whereby the relevant community forges its dignity. The Camusian rebellious ideal of human solidarity necessitates the solitariness of estrangement from the nation, that is, of *AlieNation* in solitude, at a critical distance from the nation. The stranger has the Greek tragic *hubris* to go *hyper*, beyond the limits set by the community, becoming a *hybrid* whose contours do not fit in with the social norms. As Sisyphean heroes, strangers face

---

<sup>126</sup> 'Countryside noises were rising to me. Scents of night, of earth and of salt were freshening up my temples. The marvellous peace of this sleeping summer was coming into me like a tidal wave. In that moment, at the limit of night, sirens cried. They were announcing a departure for a world that now was forever indifferent to me. Down there, down there too, around that asylum where lives went off, the evening was like a melancholic truce. So close to death, my mom must have felt freed and ready to live all again. No one, no one had the right to shed a tear on her. And I felt ready to live all again, too. As though this huge fury had purged me from evil, emptied of hope, in front of that night loaded with signs and stars, I opened up for the first time to the tender indifference of the world. In perceiving it so akin to me, finally so brotherly, I felt that I had been happy, and that I still was. In order for all to be consumed, in order to feel less lonely, all I was left with was the hope that there would be many spectators on the day of my execution and that they would welcome me with cries of hate.'



their inevitable fall, which is inherent in the meaninglessness of existence. They intend to give a meaning to existence in the overcoming of social conventions and distinctions without ever reaching a closure, but actually in the flux of the cyclical time envisioned in the pre-Christian Mediterranean fatalism of sun, sand, and sea.

The Mediterranean fatalist circularity deployed by Camus in his radical critique of nationalist discourses is akin to Pirandello's exploration of the ancient Greek and southern Italian relativist movement initiated by Empedocles and the sophists Protagoras and Gorgias. Ironically, Pirandello's metousiastic relativism takes shape against the background of Fascist Italy. The intertextual relations between *Uno, nessuno e centomila* and *L'Etranger* demonstrate that Pirandello's relativism amounts to a full-fledged deconstruction of the essentialist discourses inherent in the ultra-nationalist ideology of fascism. His last novel sums up the author's representation of madness as a flux where meaning is constantly questioned and recreated. The similarities with the French novel show that the image of the flux can be applied to a character with a normal health condition as a metousiastic form of literary critique against the masculine and racially pure ideal of mental sanity implied by nationalism and colonialism. Both in Moscarda's schizophrenic abstention from praying and in Meursault's revolt against religious confession and his embracing the ecstatic silence of the night, the metousiastic relativist metaphor of the flux of meaning criticizes the essentially defined linearity and fixity of healthy identities.

### *Renewal in Juli Zeh's Narratives*

Authoritarian discourses and narratives of health continue to be in the target of metousiastic relativism in early twenty-first century Europe. The Camusian deconstruction of nationalist discourses is echoed in the German novel *Corpus Delicti* and the British novel *Saturday*, as can be discussed in relation to the image of health as a flux. In the year 2010, started on the disturbing note of the Detroit terrorist attack and renewed concerns about security and freedom of movement, the editorial group Random House of Munich published a paperback version of Juli Zeh's 2009 novel *Corpus Delicti. Ein Prozess*, exactly on the themes of security, state control, and civil rights. In yet one more variant on Germany's reworking of its not too distant dictatorial past, the novel explores the social and political construction of the body and health in grotesquely authoritarian forms of discipline. As the legal Latin title *corpus delicti* ironically suggests with respect to the body of evidence proving crime, the novel plays around the relationship between justice and the body. The novel's dystopian setting is a deceptively bright future where the state enforces a constitution based on scientific standards of health. The protagonist, Mia Holl, incarnates Antigone's tragic dilemma of the tension between critique and abidance to law, as she rebels against the dictatorial system and is trialled as a terrorist.

Mia's dilemma arises when her brother commits suicide while in prison due to an error in a DNA test related to a rape and murder of which he is unjustly

accused. As this event leads her to radically question the alleged infallibility of the science-based political system and the all-pervasive technological equipment, she publicly refuses to keep on doing the physical exercise demanded of all citizens for the optimal performance of their bodies. Ironically, her judges eventually decide to make a concession and not send her into exile, which would have been her only possible escape from her nightmarish community. The protagonist is eloquently portrayed as a postmodern witch, an outcast of society. The novel *Corpus Delicti* provides a highly creative relativist narration which criticizes the absolute values of security, justice, order, health, and male-centred rationality, through an imaginative depiction of revolt.

Camus' last book-length essay *L'Homme révolté* discusses exactly the philosophical idea of revolt, which focuses on its opposition to nationalism particularly in one chapter, from whence it is possible to retrieve relevant elements for a discussion of relativism in more recent texts. The nationalist rebel irreducibly betrays the primal struggle for freedom which had triggered his quixotic venture. Though promising security and union, nationalism culminates in terror and irrationality. The ensuing oxymoronic couplets security-terror and union-irrationality condense the irredeemably self-undermining contradictions of the nationalist discourse. The telling title of the section, located right in the middle of the essay, is 'Le terrorisme d'état et la terreur irrationnelle'. In fact, at the centre of the text lies the paradoxical tension between the ideal of national unity and the irrational forms in which such unity is enforced with terror.

Nationalism is founded upon the discursive utterance of the nation as unchallenged master from the perspective of the nationalist gaze. The metaphor

embodies in the first place the political promise of security. Embedded in the dense and compelling rhetoric of Camus' essay, the picture of the nationalist rebel who rises up to repair the pre-national injustice with the enforcement of national security occupies the centre of the literary stage ingeniously set up in the text. From the outset emphasis is laid upon the increasingly great audacity of the nationalist rebel. It is with measureless ambitions that Mussolini and Hitler, like Stalin and Napoleon, proposed to accomplish a revolution in 'the construction of the human city and of real freedom',<sup>127</sup> that is, the modern state as an *Ersatz* of the divine kingdom.

By virtue of its absoluteness, this secular substitute is starkly contradictory to the very idea of revolt. Like the communist one, the nationalist revolt finds its origin in the enlightened revolt against the absolutism of religion, which posits the freedom of humanity from otherworldly powers. This notwithstanding, its culmination is yet another absolutism, which continues to engender forms of tyranny similar to the religious ones originally opposed and eventually merely replaced and thereby perpetuated. The ensuing absolutism is that of freedom, which in this case takes on the form of the grandeur of the nation. While striving for emancipation from the religious master, the nationalist rebel pursues a dream of an again absolute mastery which again results in slavery. With a rhetoric imbued with the absolute ideal of the security of the nation, Mussolini and Hitler actually constructed a terrorist state, against which it is necessary to rebel in a relativist fashion, that is, without affirming the universal worth of only one discursive perspective.

---

<sup>127</sup> Camus, Albert, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

The German novel *Corpus Delicti* portrays a dystopian future in order to suggest the potential terrorism of the historical successor of the imperialist nation state criticized by Camus, that is, modern liberal democracy, with its reliance on the linearity of science and technology. The British novel *Saturday* by Ian McEwan represents exactly the linear and the circular conceptions of time in a wide variety of literary images. Following the hours of one day, in a superb rewriting of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* in the early twenty-first century London dominated by the mass-media, chronological linearity culminates in the metaliterary reflection on the power of poetry at the end of the day.<sup>128</sup> The dense stream of consciousness breaks the timeline of the day, as memory and anxious anticipation punctuate the narration. The fusion of linear and circular time is echoed in the juxtaposition of essentialist and relativist narratives of language, class, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, health, and age.

An assessment limited to gender highlights the text's reliance on the imperialist and patriarchal discourse sanctioning that the 'coolheaded, unflappable masculinity of the British, a masculinity tempered by judiciousness, rationality, and empathy, is absolutely necessary in a post-9/11 world'.<sup>129</sup> However, as soon

---

<sup>128</sup> The finale is dominated by the power of Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*. The novel's seeming essentialism of the western canon was discussed by Hadley, Orr, Heller, Szalai, and Crumey. In contrast, Griffiths' analysis highlights that the novel's incorporation of the poem reflects on the force of beauty. The circular use of the poem from the twentieth century on 15th February 2003 provides the transhistorical remedy to the linear narrative culminating in the violence at the end of the day. See: Elaine Hadley, 'On a Darkling Plain', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 48 (2005), pp. 92-102; Andrew Crumey, 'Perils of Seizing the Day', in *Scotland on Sunday* (06/02/2005), p. 8; Zoe Heller, 'One Day in the Life', in *New York Times Book Review*, (20/03/2005), p. 1; David Orr, 'Who Needs Mace? Whip Out That Sonnet', in *New York Times Book Review* (26/6/2005), p. 7; Jennifer Szalai, 'DAY-TRIPPER: The mundane raptures of Ian McEwan', in *Harper's Magazine* (2005), pp. 87-92; Paul J. Griffiths, 'Nor Certitude, Nor Peace', in *First Things* (January 2007), p. 28.

<sup>129</sup> Rebecca Carpenter, "'We're Not a Friggin' Girl Band'", in *Literature After 9/11*, ed. by Ana Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 156.

as gender is analysed in its intersections with the other narratives constituting the novel's literary aesthetics, what seems to correspond to a patriarchal representation of real men's superiority in mastering moments of deep anxiety is confused by the pervasiveness of relativist images. That linear and male rationality is not portrayed as the essence to face global and everyday angst is evident from the novel's use of realism, the global context, and the local story of the protagonist, Perowne.

Perowne is a neurosurgeon with a happy family in London. Their tranquillity is disrupted on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003 by the demonstrations against the Iraq war and the sudden attack of the young gangster Baxter, who irrupts into Perowne's house to threaten him and his family so as to quench his thirst for social revenge derived from his condition as an outcast affected by an incurable genetic disease. The plot is based on global-local narratives of identity and memory where participation in world debates and belonging to the local social system interact with each other. Emphasis is placed on health, in the tension between the protagonist doctor and the antagonist patient. The realism of the setting and the story suggests the feeling of mastery over reality thanks to the knowledge of objective facts. Conversely, the counterpointing theme of dreaming and imagination runs from the start to the end of the text, hinting at the illusory character of any ideal of reality.

The social construction of facts is crucial in Camus' text. The French essay's antinationalist metousiastic glance reveals that the terror of the nationalist rebel is a negative dynamism. It consists of his will 'to found a stable order upon a perpetual movement and negation' manifested in a morality of 'resentment,

inexhaustibly'.<sup>130</sup> The nationalist cult of action is thus deconstructed in its constitutive discursive elements in such a way as to highlight the intrinsic paradox of the whole discourse. The nationalist promise of security in a 'stable order' has as its absurd foundation 'perpetual movement and negation', which sustain themselves in the despotic machine of an irreducibly terrorist state. The Others against whom this discourse shapes itself in always negative terms range from the Jews to the Anglo-Saxons and the Slavonic, in a destructive dialectic whose self-referential dynamic constantly needs enemies to re-enact time and again the triumph of the nation.

It is a Hegelian dialectic moved not by reason, but by irrational drives which, in the text, is traced back to the resentment observed by Nietzsche in terms of envy towards autonomous creativity and critique. In this respect, Camus' analysis is so nuanced as to convey the complexity and ambiguity of the relationship between nationalism and modern rationality in contrast to irrational religion by underscoring the use of religion made by Mussolini and Hitler in their rhetoric. The irrational instincts motivating nationalism are masked with an ideological and inconsistent use of religious rhetoric whereby they are channelled into the rational and modern discourse of the nationalist state machine, which advances relentlessly in a profusion of terror in spite of its original promise of security in a 'stable order'. Ultimately, the action glorified in the nationalist discourse is unmasked as a re-action against what is irrationally sensed as an abominable injustice. Against such injustice, the nationalist rebel revolts, only to create in terror yet more injustice.

---

<sup>130</sup> Camus, *ibidem*, p. 223.

This paradoxical order of terror dwells at the invisible boundary between the imperialism exalted in the nationalist ideology and the irreducible provincialism of the idea of nation.<sup>131</sup> The absurdity here lies in the contradiction between the ideological use of the promise of national security and grandeur, on the one hand, and the renunciation to universality inherent in the observance of nationalism, on the other hand. Hindered in its aims by its own lack of universal values due to its foundation in the all but universal notion of the nation, the discourse of nationalism can only achieve an empire of technique, where the national security envisaged is pursued in the terrorist enslavement of the nation to the State's technology.

Again, the self-referential principles of the nationalist discourse posit a *telos* which is undermined in its very pursuance in order for the discourse to continue positing the same *telos* again, without really achieving it, but rather perpetuating its need to legitimate nationalist policies. 'The Empire [...] is simultaneously the world industrial and military base, where who reigns is the soldier worker as a slave': promising to lead the nation to master the world, the nationalist State enslaves the nation to a set of alienating laws of productivity, serving their own 'cynical principles of dynamism'. Evidently, the subjectivity of the nation as the master in the nationalist rhetoric involves a concept of mastery which actually amounts not to freedom, but to slavery to the goals envisaged by the terrorist State to guarantee what is supposed to be security. Such 'spiritual slavery' is endorsed by the nation with its inevitable sentiment to life: 'contempt'.

---

<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.



The dominant sentiment, or actually *ressentiment*, in the nationalist state is the contempt nourished in the terrorist regime and projected upon the Others. In fact, the concepts of nation and race have their *raison d'être* in the nationalist gaze's perception of a threat to their security.<sup>132</sup> It is to this end that nationalism legitimates its suspension of legality which results certainly not in the security sought, but in terror. To close and reopen the vicious circle, the terror of the suspension of legality generates and maintains the contempt for the Others which makes it possible to identify always new threats as an excuse for prolonging the suspension of legality and the ensuing terror *ad infinitum*. *Corpus Delicti* and *Saturday* underscore the potential for the systematic exclusion of otherness within the modern liberal democratic political forms which replaced nationalism in Europe.

The German text represents a dystopian state based on a disturbing form of health terrorism, as evident from the extensive explanation provided by the ideologist Kramer:

Im Gegensatz zu allen Systemen der Vergangenheit gehorchen wir weder dem Markt noch einer Religion. Wir brauchen keine verstiegenen Ideologien. Wir brauchen nicht einmal den bigotten Glauben an einer Volksherrschaft, um unser System zu legitimieren. Wir gehorchen allein der Vernunft, indem wir uns auf eine Tatsache berufen, die sich unmittelbar aus der Existenz von biologischem Leben ergibt. Denn *ein* Merkmal ist jedem lebenden Wesen zu eigen. Es zeichnet jedes Tier und

---

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 226.

jede Pflanze und erst recht den Menschen aus: Der unbedingte, individuelle und kollektive Überlebenswille. Ihn erheben wir als Grundlage der großen Übereinkunft, auf die sich unsere Gesellschaft stützt. Wir haben eine METHODE entwickelt, die darauf abzielt, jedem Einzelnen ein möglichst langes, störungsfreies, das heißt, gesundes und glückliches Leben zu garantieren. Frei von Schmerz und Leid. Zu diesem Zweck haben wir unseren Staat hochkomplex organisiert, komplexer als jeden anderen vor ihm. Unsere Gesetze funktionieren in filigraner Feinabstimmung, vergleichbar dem Nervensystems eines Organismus. Unser System ist perfekt, auf wundersame Weise lebensfähig und stark wie ein Körper – allerdings ebenso anfällig. Ein simpler Verstoß gegen eine der Grundregeln kann diesen Organismus schwer verletzen und sogar töten.<sup>133</sup>

The state of the *METHOD* claims to pursue the objective good of the collective, associated with health. Metaphorically, this totalitarian state poses itself as a healthy body, a perfect organism whose harmony is in constant jeopardy of disruption. This metaphor is reminiscent of Roman imperialism and stresses the discourse of the healthy body as re-interpreted in modern essentialism. The

---

<sup>133</sup> ‘In contrast to all past systems, we obey neither the market, nor any religion. We do not need any belief in national supremacy as a legitimation of our system. We obey only reason, in that we invoke an objective fact that is essential to the existence of biological life. For *one* feature inheres in each living creature. It marks every animal and every plant and humanity itself: the unconditional, individual and collective will to survive. We elevate this principle as the foundation of the great agreement on which our society rests. We developed a *METHOD* aimed to guarantee a possibly long, undisturbed, that is, healthy and happy life for each individual. Devoid of pain and suffering. To this end we organized an overcomplex state, more complex than ever before. Our laws function in filigree harmony, as can be compared to the nervous system of an organism. Our system is perfect, wonderfully alive and strong as a body – nonetheless, equally vulnerable. One simple attack against any of its basic rules can cost this organism severe wounds and even death.’ Zeh, Juli, *Corpus Delicti. Ein Prozess* (Munich: Random House, 2010), pp. 36-37.

seeming length of this account hides the propagandistic rhetoric denounced in the novel. The totalitarian regime itself above and beyond both the market and religion. Its rational ethos is used as a source of legitimacy. The fear of wounds or death functions as a trigger and fuel for the unjust justification of illegitimate injustices. By pushing this historical reminiscence farther and letting it stretch for many lines in her text, the author makes the point that the system's vulnerability is the justification for the persecution of any critics, such as Mia.

Although health looks as an ideal that transcends the logic of the market and nationalist rage, the METHOD is in fact the culmination of the health models advertised for commercial purposes in liberal societies, in conjunction with a kind of state terrorism reminiscent of nationalist policies. Health purity is posited as the essence, whereas Mia is a hybrid citizen, associated with a witch. The etymology of the German word for witch is traced back to the original meaning of *hedge-rider* in the novel, underscoring Mia's border-identity:

Die Zaunreiterin befindet sich auf der Grenze zwischen Zivilisation und Wildnis. Zwischen Diesseits und Jenseits, Leben und Tod, Körper und Geist. Zwischen Ja und Nein, Glaube und Atheismus. Sie weiß nicht zu welcher Seite sie gehört. Ihr Reich ist das *Dazwischen*.<sup>134</sup>

In stark contrast to the state's essentialism of health purity, Mia is a relativist hybrid, who finds value beyond the conventional dichotomy of survival and death. Her liminal and cyclical oscillation between extremes as in a flux provides a lucid

---

<sup>134</sup> 'The hedge-rider finds herself at the border between civilization and the wild. Between this and that side, life and death, body and mind. Between yes and no, belief and atheism. She does not know where she belongs.' *Ibidem*, p. 144.

reflection on identity and otherness in a post-liberal society dominated by an essentialist discourse reminiscent of nationalist ideologies and propaganda.

Otherness and identity are explored extensively in the novel *Saturday* by Ian McEwan. The global background against which the story is set constitutes the source of Perowne's day-long reflections upon the possibility of historical progress. The local dimension of the story itself is manifested principally in Perowne's clash with Baxter, where their different positions in society find a violent encounter. In the juxtaposition of the linear narratives of objective reality, historical progress, and social conventions with the circular narratives of imagination, eternal recurrence, and transgression, the text represents global anxiety as derived from the global-local renegotiation of identity and memory. Realism, global change, and local conventions are rendered chiefly in Perowne's and Baxter's intersectional subjectivities.

In contrast to Baxter's immature and aggressive masculinity aggravated by his genetic disease and low social position, Perowne's identity and memory are marked by the intersections of the language of science, dominant class and sex, rational male gender performance, domestic(ated) sexuality, pure ethnicity, privileged civil participation, healthy condition, and mature age. His local alter ego, Baxter, brings the tension which converges with the global anxiety of the anti-Iraq war demonstration. Reality's relativity to perspective is conveyed in the disenchantment of the realist representation of the day in London. Perowne's stream of consciousness is characterized by the neurosurgeon's reliance on common sense, rationality, and the assumption that the news from the media, both television and radio, must correspond to the simple facts. His modern naivety is

radically disenchanted on one single day, on which the global angst for the imminent Iraq war gives way to the local violence unleashed by the unexpected encounter with Baxter.

London's hybridization of global individualism and local communalism provides the background of Perowne's perception:

[...] The car gives him vague satisfaction when he's driving [...].  
[...] He's heading a couple of blocks south in order to loop eastward across the Tottenham Court Road. Cleveland Street used to be known for garment sweatshops and prostitutes. Now it has Greek, Turkish and Italian restaurants – the local sorts which never get mentioned in the guides – with terraces where people eat out in summer. There's a man who repairs old computers, a fabric shop [...], a wig emporium, much visited by transvestites. This is the fair embodiment of an inner city byway – diverse, self-confident, obscure. And it's at this point he remembers the source of his vague sense of shame or embarrassment: his readiness to be persuaded that the world has changed beyond recall, that harmless streets like this and the tolerant life they embody can be destroyed by the new enemy – well-organised, tentacular, full of hatred and focused zeal. How foolishly apocalyptic those apprehensions seem by daylight, when the self-evident fact of the streets and the people on them are their own justification, their own insurance. The world has not fundamentally changed. Talk of a hundred-year crisis is

indulgence. There are always crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle into place, alongside recent wars, climate change, the politics of international trade, land and fresh water shortages, hunger, poverty and the rest.<sup>135</sup>

As in Zeh's lengthy depiction conveying the indoctrination of national subjects, this account of liberalist insouciance stretches over a longer passage a very straightforward and succinct commentary on a society dominated by the media. The enemy is made to resemble a threatening octopus through the use of the adjective *tentacular*. History is posed as an endless state of unsolvable crisis. The attributes of diversity, self-confidence, and obscurity mark a sharp contrast between potential and actual fulfilment. Paranoid and near-authoritarian leanings pervade developed societies. The discourse of progress is presented in all its blatant ambiguity. Once again, this strategic verbosity is a literary device which contrives to render the shallow rhetoric of propaganda precisely by mimicking its flamboyance.

Following the simplistic rendition offered through the mass-media, Perowne is blind to his contradictory perceptions that, on the one hand, the local authenticity of London has changed completely due to its global-local hybridization, with new spaces for different ethnic and even sexual (sub-)cultures, and, on the other hand, history follows a linear and stable course which, as if unchangingly, involves the certain triumph of the force of progress over all kinds of provisional crises, such as Islamic terrorism. The insensitivity to the

---

<sup>135</sup> McEwan, Ian, *Saturday* (London: Random House, 2006), pp. 76-77.

contradiction between London's hybrid change and history's stable progress is related to the media-broadcast positive belief that migration is functional to progress, as migrants and other, even sexual, formerly discriminated minorities will assimilate in the global system mastered by modern techno-scientific rationality. This illusion is revealed as such by the neurosurgeon's clash with one of the many excluded from modern society, in a powerful narrative which lays bare the inner contradictions of so-called advanced societies, where the power of the media is used to shift attention from such internal contradictions to the supposed threat of primitive external enemies.

Propaganda and the demonization of otherness permeate the nationalist discourse analysed by Camus. The nationalist State is a terrorist machine of repressive propaganda and offensive military. The functioning of the nationalist State is here associated with the technological working of a machine, which just follows and maintains its own constitutive mechanisms. This technological device works in two directions: inwardly and outwardly. The inner ramification of the nationalist State is the apparatus for propaganda. By this means, the machine exerts the repression of the other-minded and guarantees the perpetual indoctrination which creates the subjects of the nation. Outwardly, then, the nationalist machine relies heavily on the State army. In the activity of war outside of its borders, the nationalist State pursues its never-ending fight against the enemies threatening national security, who are in principle all those who do not belong to the nation. Irremediably, the outcome is a terrorist State, which does not keep its promise of security, but keeps the feeling of insecurity, needed for its own terrorist functioning, alive.

Further excesses of the nationalist ideology detected in the essay are: the cult of the leader, the reification of life illustrated in the exercise of the power of death upon a Greek mother and her children as well as in the irrational desperation and pride in the destruction of the city of Lidice, and the absolute value of success and self-destruction. In all these ways, nationalism promises freedom, while enforcing slavery. Actually, 'real freedom is an inner submission',<sup>136</sup> that is, the fatalistic acceptance of the presence of limits to one's will. The paradoxical excesses of nationalism derive from its ideal of absolute freedom. Conversely, a relative concept of freedom, where one's freedom is limited by that of the others, can escape the aberrations of nationalism. Rather than Nordic imperialism, it is Mediterranean mildness alias moderation which promises the possibility of a revolt faithful to itself.

Nationalism is thus deconstructed into its rhetorical forms, whereby the power of language creates the political power of the discourse. In turn, nationalism is itself only one ephemeral morpheme of the meta-historical language of politics, as conveyed in the parallels between totalitarian regimes of opposite ideologies in the text. The revolt is the assertion of the existence of limits to absolutism; it is a movement for relativism. All revolts in European history eventually lost sight of this insurgent, relativistic spirit and gave way to new absolute (meaning literally *boundless*, limitless) principles:

Loin de revendiquer une indépendance générale, le révolté veut qu'il soit reconnu que la liberté a ses limites partout où se trouve un être humain, la

---

<sup>136</sup> Camus, *ibidem*, p. 231.



limite étant précisément le pouvoir de révolte de cet être . . . (G)râce à la révolte [...] la puissance illimitée n' [...] est pas la seule lois. C'est au nom d'une autre valeur que le révolté affirme l'impossibilité de la liberté totale en même temps qu'il réclame pour lui-même la relative liberté, nécessaire pour reconnaître cette impossibilité. Chaque liberté humaine, à sa racine plus profonde, est ainsi relative. La liberté absolue [...] se coupe alors de ses racines.<sup>137</sup>

Thus, absolute values such as those derived from God and reason, simply by virtue of their very absoluteness, do violence to human limits and result in oppression. Only a relative freedom which takes into account the limitations implied by the fact that it is exercised not on ideal entities, but on complex subjects, can achieve the revolt's authentic goal to provide unity without oppression. Far from dismissing *tout court* the metaphysical and rationalist absolutisms it rebels against, the Mediterranean spirit establishes a harmonious system in which, while imposing an order over the chaos of reality, values such as freedom and justice limit each other.

The philosophy underlying the revolt is, indeed, the philosophy of limits, relativism itself, as the rebel faces reality as an artist would: 'il la repousse sans s'y dérober'.<sup>138</sup> The 'thought of midday' acknowledges the temperance of things, that is, the moderation of their existence. Like all ideological systems yearning for

---

<sup>137</sup> 'Far from advocating general independence, the rebel wants the acknowledgement that freedom has its limits everywhere human beings are, the limit being precisely the power to revolt of these beings. Thanks to the revolt, limitless power is not the only law. It is in the name of a different value that the rebel affirms the impossibility of total freedom, thus invoking for himself the relative freedom needed to recognize this impossibility. Down to its deepest roots, every human freedom is, hence, relative. Absolute freedom, then, cuts itself off its roots.' *Ibidem*, p. 341.

<sup>138</sup> 'he pushes it away without dismissing it', p. 347.

the absolute, nationalism is a self-betraying revolt. The possibility of the freedom longed-for lies in the Mediterranean philosophy of moderation in the metousiastic flux of cyclical history. With the awareness of the cyclical recurrence of ideological contradictions in history, it is possible to embrace the moderation of the philosophy of midday. As discussed, the link between the Mediterranean imagery and Meursault's dissent from the norms of the nation plays a crucial role in Camus' novel *L'Etranger*'s reflection on national and individual identity in the colony. With his ecstatic fatalism and enjoyment of the meaninglessness and absurdity symbolized by the dry landscape, as well as in his deviation from social expectations, the stranger achieves a revolt which, far from culminating in an again absolutist heroic triumph – which would only perpetuate conformation to essentialist values of subjectivity – leads to his tragic relativist embracement of execution, as with Moscarda's embracing of madness in Pirandello's novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila*. Such hyperbolic literary figures embody the philosophical idea of revolt, whose conceptual opposite is the rigid idea of normal health questioned by *Corpus Delicti* and *Saturday* in their respective narrative solutions.

Perowne's Woolfian moments of being are precisely those trains of thought where the impressive injustice of modern techno-scientifically based societies becomes apparent:

The sandwich bars along the street are closed up for the weekend.  
[...] Coming towards Perowne, his back to the crowds, is a pink-faced man of about his own age, in a baseball cap and yellow Day-Glo jacket, with a handcart, sweeping the gutter for the council.

[...] What could be more futile than this underpaid urban scale housework when behind him, at the far end of the street, cartons and paper cups are spreading thickly under the feet of demonstrators gathered outside McDonald's on the corner. [...] As the two men pass, their eyes meet briefly, neutrally. [...] For a vertiginous moment Henry feels himself bound to the other man, as though on a seesaw with him, pinned to an axis that could tip them into each other's life.<sup>139</sup>

In this accidental glimpse of class division, as well as in his meeting with his old mother, the rational neurosurgeon realises that actually 'moments of precise reckoning are rare'.<sup>140</sup> The belief in a rational measure enabling social progress is illusory, as shown by modern societies' crowds of irrational outcasts like Baxter. Perowne's stream of consciousness revolves around the foundation of advanced societies upon the exclusion of subjects classified as unworthy of fully participating in techno-scientific privilege.

Modern exclusion is no better than social exclusion in traditional societies:

Perowne looks away and slows before turning into the mews where his car is garaged. How restful it must once have been, in another age, to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life. And not see how the belief served your own prosperity – a form of anosognosia, a

---

<sup>139</sup> McEwan, *ibidem*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>140</sup> P. 156.

useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one's own condition. Now we think we do see, how do things stand? After the ruinous experiments of the lately deceased century, after so much vile behaviour, so many deaths, a queasy agnosticism has settled around these matters of justice and redistributed wealth. No more big ideas. The world must improve, if at all, by tiny steps. People mostly take an existential view – having to sweep the streets for a living looks like simple bad luck. The streets need to be cleaned. Let the unlucky enlist.<sup>141</sup>

However, Perowne prefers to believe in the dream of progress, broadcast by the media:

He listens to the Schubert sweetly fade and swell. [...] Life [...] has steadily improved over the centuries for most people, despite the junkies and beggars now. [...] The teachers [...] at university thought the idea of progress old-fashioned and ridiculous. [...] The young lecturers there like to dramatise modern life as a sequence of calamities. [...] It wouldn't be cool or professional to count the eradication of smallpox as part of the modern condition. Or the recent spread of democracies. [...] But [...] the future will look back on us as gods, certainly in this city, lucky gods blessed by supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm

---

<sup>141</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

clothes that weigh nothing, extended life-spans, wondrous machines.<sup>142</sup>

Ultimately, the rational subject attributes ‘anosognosia’ to primitive societies, without recognising his own ‘lack of awareness’. The information available through the media, with its selection which ‘serves (their) own prosperity’, creates the illusion of progress based on techno-scientific achievements. Only in the violent clash with Baxter can Perowne gain relativist awareness.

Perowne finally manages to hit Baxter and give him to the authorities, but the apparent return to normal is marked by the awareness awoken by the accident. Baxter’s irruption in Perowne’s house suggests that modern societies cannot achieve security by fighting external enemies, such as supposedly primitive Islamic communities. Exactly as is the case with traditional societies, techno-scientifically based societies rely on the exclusion of those deemed to be unfit as deviating from normal health and social status. Their violence is fatally turned against those who are privileged by the modern system of organisation.

The sense of history as cyclical is conveyed towards the end of *Corpus Delicti*, when Mia is already in prison:

Es hat sich nichts geändert. Es ändert sich niemals etwas. Ein System ist so gut wie das andere. Das Mittelalter ist keine Epoche. Mittelalter ist der Name der menschlichen Natur.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.

<sup>143</sup> ‘Nothing changed. Nothing ever does. One system is as good as another. The Middle Ages is not a historical period. Middle Ages is the name of human nature.’ Zeh, *ibidem*, p. 235.

This is Mia's reflection after she is threatened with torture. On the one hand, the METHOD claims to provide an objective foundation for the discipline of the citizens, that is, their will to survive and enjoy good health. On the other hand, Mia denounces the state as based on yet another ideological system which perpetuates the oppression associated with the traditional religious societies of medieval Europe.

Before her final sentence, Mia can only engage in a passionate public proclamation of the need for a revolt:

Holt die Guillotine aus dem Keller, tötet Hunderttausende! Plündert, vergewaltigt! Hungert und friert! Und wenn ihr dazu nicht bereit seid, gebt Ruhe. Ihr könnt euch feige nennen oder vernünftig. Haltet euch für Privatmänner, für Mitläufer oder Anhänger des Systems. Für unpolitisch oder individuell. Für Verräter an der Menschheit oder treue Beschützer des Menschlichen. Es macht keinen Unterschied. Tötet oder schweigt. Alles andere ist Theater.<sup>144</sup>

As a victim of the dystopian system's oppression, the character embodies the revolt against the absolute order of normal health and bare survival. Her words are a witch's curse on a community where the fluid liminality of being is suppressed in the name of essentially defined health.

---

<sup>144</sup> 'Take the guillotine out of the cellar, kill hundreds of thousands! Raid, rape! Starve and freeze! And if you are not ready for this, be quiet. You can call yourselves coward or sensible. Estimate yourselves to be private parties, followers or supporters of the system. Apolitical or individualist. Betrayers of humanity or loyal protectors of people. It makes no difference. Die or shut up. Everything else is theatre.' *Ibidem*, p. 258.

Mia and Perowne constitute complementary images in the relativist questioning of liberal societies, associated with discursive elements akin to the nationalist ideologies discussed by Camus. On the one hand, Perowne's narrative suggests that the liberal war on terror is instrumental to distracting the public from the social inequalities of modern western societies. On the other hand, the parable of Mia hints at the terrorist potential of the liberal state, where dissent is surreptitiously and sometimes even violently suppressed. While in *Saturday* it is the antagonist's terrorist attack that calls into question the presuppositions of liberal democracy, *Corpus Delicti* centres on the protagonist's revolt against the state, which is delegitimated as a terrorist actor.

Both novels criticise liberal societies in terms reminiscent of the Camusian account of nationalism. The British novel's emphasis on the contrast between the neurosurgeon and the incurable patient converges with the German text's contraposition of a dystopian system based on health and a rebel claiming the right to embrace the limitedness and flux of existence. Health control is posed as the culmination of a linear model of progress. In stark contrast, the representations of terrorism in modern societies stress that the cult of health is merely one drop in the flux of memory, where meaning is constantly questioned and recreated.

As with *Saturday*, *Corpus Delicti* suggests that the ideological use of health for political control and social distinctions is a mere substitute for the ideological use of the ideals of the nation and post-mortem salvation. In this respect, health is revealed as merely one of the hegemonic interpretative schemes that succeed one another in the flux where meaning is negotiated. This adds a crucial dimension to the image of flux deployed in Pirandello's *Uno, nessuno e*

*centomila*. While the Italian novel uses the image of a cyclical flux of death and rebirth to describe the relativist condition of ironically healthier awareness perceived as mental illness by society, the German novel deploys a Camusian cyclical conception of time, where medieval and health-informed societies participate in the endless renegotiation of interpretations and meanings, instead of representing distinct stages in a linear ascent towards the highest good. In their distinctive ways, both texts criticise the essentialist idea of health as a set of solid and objective facts regulated by immutable natural laws.

#### *The Cinema of Passive Terrorism*

Estranged social behaviour and active political terrorism are more blatant forms of revolt than that literally *em-bodied* in the unintentional condition of difference from medical standards of normality, that is, so-called disability. From a critical perspective, this condition's contingency upon socially constructed norms hints at the desirability to call it disabledness, so as to shift emphasis onto the situation where the subjects concerned are constructed as disabled by the relevant social conventions that exist prior to the emergence of their condition. The films *Le chiavi di casa*, *vincent will meer* and *Mar adentro* display an acceptance of disabledness on the part of the main characters that amounts to a passive form of revolt to the socially constructed unacceptability (or lesser acceptability, for that matter) of their difference from clinically defined normality.



*Le chiavi di casa* by Gianni Amelio turns on its head the relationship of emotional support between a father, Gianni, and his disabled teen-age son, Paolo.<sup>145</sup> Inspired by, though not based upon, Giuseppe Pontiggia's autobiographical novel *Nati due volte*, the film revolves around Paolo's deep understanding and Gianni's emotional insecurity. Its merit is the exploration of the father's ambivalent feelings during their journeys to Germany and the Norwegian fjords, without any excess of the stylistic features of the melodramatic genre.<sup>146</sup> Through a sober blend of psychological close-ups, majestic landscapes, and enthralling soundtrack, the narration conveys the difficulties faced by Gianni due to his barrier of normality. His intention to symbolically give Paolo the eponymous keys and take him home after a long stay in various medical institutions suggests his willingness to learn from his disabled son. Ironically, his assumption of having nothing to learn from his son is debunked.

By contrast, parodist exaggeration marks *vincent will meer* by Ralf Huettner. The film lends itself to the accusations of superficiality and lacking credibility.<sup>147</sup> However, its virtuoso play of clichés exposes exactly the reductionism of conventional norms. In this road movie on a psychiatric patient who travels to the Italian seaside with his mother's ashes in a box, the uneasy collusion of disability and pathetic spectacle is dexterously avoided.<sup>148</sup> Affected by a syndrome that often makes him swear compulsively and loudly, the

---

<sup>145</sup> Rodio, Antonello, 'Un handicap d'affetto', *Movieplayer* (2004), <http://www.movieplayer.it/articoli/00814/un-handicap-d-affetto/>.

<sup>146</sup> Dawson, Thomas, 'Review of *The Keys to the House*', *BBC Films* (2005), [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/03/22/the\\_keys\\_to\\_the\\_house\\_2005\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/03/22/the_keys_to_the_house_2005_review.shtml).

<sup>147</sup> Oberländer, Jan, 'Raus aus der Anstalt! Ralf Huettners Komödie „vincent will meer“', *Der Tagesspiegel* (2010), <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/raus-aus-der-anstalt/1805800.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Filmbewertungsstelle Wiesbaden, [http://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/vincent\\_will\\_meer](http://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/vincent_will_meer).

protagonist Vincent is portrayed as ultimately more adaptive than his father, a politician whose masculinity and class awareness are drastically caricatured in his inadequacy to cope with his son's social stigma.

Alejandro Amenábar's *Mar adentro* lays bare the social obligations that make survival unbearable in the poetically narrated real case of a quadriplegic patient, Ramón Sampedro, and his fight for the right to die. This lyrical film renders the disadvantaged protagonist's memories of his privileged past as a sailor through suggestive sequences depicting his surreal evasion out of the room where he is confined, flying with his fantasy to the sea. The narration generates the audience's empathy toward the character's wish to rebel against the social and legal obligation to let his family assist him to barely survive.<sup>149</sup> The plot centres on the empathy of those around him, particularly two female characters, a fan of his poems and a lawyer, who defends in court his right to die.<sup>150</sup> *Mar adentro* is a poignant documentary about the absurd norm of surviving and the socially constructed unacceptability of embracing death by accepting a situation where life is unwished. Ramón's revolt to forced survival corresponds to his acceptance of the sudden end which was put to his parable as a sailor by the accident that radically and irrevocably changed his fate.

In the Spanish film, state authority is the collective character that represents the social construction of limits as unacceptable and in need of control, while the quadriplegic embodies the acceptance of the limitedness of existence. His lyrically narrated memories of the sea become a symbol of the flux of being,

---

<sup>149</sup> Russel, Jamie, 'Review of *Mar adentro*', *BBC Films* (2005), [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/02/01/the\\_sea\\_inside\\_2005\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/02/01/the_sea_inside_2005_review.shtml) .

<sup>150</sup> Tefarikis, Xrisi, 'Crítica del film *Mar adentro*', *Apocatasis.com – Literatura y contenidos seleccionados* (2004), <http://www.apocatasis.com/mar-adentro-critica-cine.php#axzz182E6W7qc> .

where one wave devours the other and none lasts forever. Similarly, Paolo's and Vincent's special relationship to the farthest sea, that is, the North Sea and the Mediterranean Sea respectively, is interwoven with their unmasking of their healthy fathers' limitedness when facing the fluid and liminal condition of disabledness. The associations of disabled characters with women (the mother of another patient in Paolo's clinic and Vincent's anorexic travel mate) and with the waves of the sea criticise and overcome the solid and masculine ideal of health normalized in medicine and legislation. These films deploy the image of a flux to suggest the limitations that are faced by disabled and normalized subjects alike.

### *Fluidity as a Key Image*

The novels *Uno, nessuno e centomila* and *Corpus Delicti*, and the films *Le chiavi di casa* and *vincent will meer*, along with such texts as *L'Etranger*, *L'Homme révolté*, *Saturday*, and *Mar adentro*, make recourse to an imagery of the flux which articulates a metousiastic relativist conception of the healthy body as subject to the fluxes of interpretation, historical change, and all-pervasive limitations. In particular, Moscarda embraces the flux of the endless manifestations of being, Mia announces the historical flux of ever-changing meanings and values, and both Paolo and Vincent literally embody the flux of the limits which, far from being represented as unique to the disabled, pervade normalized subjects. The imagery of the flux runs through European

representations of health in a number of different forms. The textual readings offered in the three subsequent chapters are simply applications and extensions of these semiotic findings to yet more films and novels concerned with age, sex, and ethnicity along the same lines as the health-focused novels and films above, which provides our overview of metousiastic relativism for cultural identity in European literature and cinema.

The narratives of individual madness in *Uno, nessuno e centomila* and state-managed health terrorism in *Corpus Delicti* unmask the discourse of illness as a socially constructed stigma against critical creativity and that of health as a contingent cultural value, respectively. Moscarda's critical awareness of the absurdity of conventions and his creative embracement of the irreducible multiplicity of being are echoed in the French-Algerian stranger, Meursault, whose Camusian revolt rebels against the nationalist and imperialist ideology. A Camusian revolt against hegemony is central in Mia's and Perowne's parables, which hint at the relativity and limitations of a medicalized society.

Epitomized in Ramón's rebellion against the imperative to survive, the critique of the flux is visualized by the breathtaking seascapes of *Le chiavi di casa* and *vincent will meer*. Both films deploy the narratives of physically disabled sons and emotionally dry fathers to overcome the conventional distinction between health and illness. As the sea tide, existence is in flux, in contrast to the linear discourses of essence, stability, and health. Moscarda's fluid madness, Mia's cyclical association of health-based societies with the Middle Ages, and Paolo's and Vincent's embracement of the wave-like ephemerality of existence deconstruct essentialist discourses of health and disease. The darkness of insanity,

backwardness and the untameable sea are images that overshadow the essentialist ideal of health and highlight a fatalist awareness of the limits of the body.

## II. THE ECSTASY OF OVERTHROWING AGE CONVENTIONS

The reliance on an essentialist concept of solid health within modern discourses of identity is deterministically motivated by a linear narrative where the unstable condition of childhood necessarily develops into the stability of adulthood. In his Nietzschean critique, Michel Foucault argued that modern medicine and science exert their power through the *rational instruments* (pp. 102-103-109) of the sexual dispositive for the knowledge of biological reproduction. These bio-political instruments are specifically the categories of children, women, couples, and perverts. Children are subjects in the making, whose sexual practices such as masturbation attract the scientific will to knowledge. Women are potential mothers of new subjects; therefore, their willingness and unwillingness to procreate are central in the medical discourse on hysteria. The Malthusian couple is the reproductive unit whose sexual activities need to be scientifically channelled into the greatest possible demographic utility. Perverts, finally, deviate from the norms of subjectivity codified in the scientific discourse; they need to be controlled. The *discursive organ*, then, in the *positive dispositive of domination* (p. 113) is the space where all these categories intersect: the family.

The ensuing scientific dispositive, thus, while bearing the decadent mark of atomization and individualization, does not simply repress and negate; it exerts its own power in the knowledge of sexuality whereby it positively posits the values of family, reproduction, and the conservation of life. This discourse is in itself a mechanic organism where ‘aucun <<schéma de transformation>> ne pourrait fonctionner si [...] il ne s’inscrivait [...] dans une stratégie d’ensemble’

(‘no ‘model of change’ could function without being inscribed in an organised strategy’, pp. 132-132). The ‘technologie du sexe’ (‘technology of sex’, p. 155) is the liberal-bourgeois *bio-politics* of self-conservation. The medical sciences function in a machine which governs life according to its laws for the regulation of body and mind in function to the conservation of life which is possible in the normativity of reproductive sexuality. As the mechanisms of *scientia sexualis* make out, the will to knowledge of sex is a self-referential discourse which enacts and reinforces its own supposedly transparent, true facts actually in the indispensable mediation of its own medical language, whereby the erotic whole is decomposed into the individual atom of family.

In itself a machine for the reproduction and subjugation of normalizable subjects, that is, children, family is the red thread unfurling across the deceptive boundary between morality and modernity. The discussion articulated by Friedrich Nietzsche illustrates the normative construction of cultural memory exactly in relation to the sacrifice of children and other moral prescriptions, which modernity replaces with scientifically legitimated norms of health:

[...] vielleicht ist sogar nichts furchtbarer und unheimlicher an der ganzen Vorgeschichte des Menschen, als seine *Mnemotechnik*. “Man brennt Etwas ein, damit es im Gedächtniss bleibt: nur was nicht aufhört, *weh zu thun*, bleibt im Gedächtniss”—das ist ein Hauptsatz aus der allerältesten (leider auch allerlängsten) Psychologie auf Erden. Man möchte selbst sagen, dass es überall, wo es jetzt noch auf Erden

Feierlichkeit, Ernst, Geheimniss, düstere Farben im Leben von  
Mensch und Volk giebt, Etwas von der Schrecklichkeit  
*nachwirkt*, mit der ehemals überall auf Erden versprochen,  
verpfändet, gelobt worden ist: die Vergangenheit, die längste  
tiefste härteste Vergangenheit, haucht uns an und quillt in uns  
herauf, wenn wir “ernst” werden. Es gieng niemals ohne Blut,  
Martern, Opfer ab, wenn der Mensch es nöthig hielt, sich ein  
Gedächtniss zu machen; die schauerlichsten Opfer und Pfänder  
(wohin die Erstlingsopfer gehören), die widerlichsten  
Verstümmelungen (zum Beispiel die Castrationen), die  
grausamsten Ritualformen aller religiösen Culte (und alle  
Religionen sind auf dem untersten Grunde Systeme von  
Grausamkeiten) — alles Das hat in jenem Instinkte seinen  
Ursprung, welcher im Schmerz das mächtigste Hilfsmittel der  
Mnemonik errieth.<sup>151</sup>

In Nietzsche’s critique, the solemnity of sacrificing children is the classical  
example of Apollonian excess of seriousness and repression of the Dionysian, that  
is, the creative force of ecstasy incarnated by children. The dualism of Apollonian

---

<sup>151</sup> ‘perhaps nothing is more dreadful and uncanny about the whole prehistory of humanity than its *mnemotechnics*. “One brands something so that it remains in memory: only what does not cease to *hurt* remains in memory” – that is a principle of the oldest (unfortunately also longest) psychology ever on earth. One might even say that everywhere on earth where there is still now solemnity, seriousness, secrecy, dark colours in the life of people and communities, something *lingers* out of the horror with which once everywhere on earth was promised, pledged, applauded: the past, the longest deepest hardest past, breathes on us and spills over in us when we become “serious”. Blood, torture, sacrifice were indispensable whenever making memory was estimated to be necessary; the most terrifying sacrifices and pledges (including the firstborn sacrifice), the most revolting mutilations (e.g. castrations), the cruellest rituals of all religious cults (and all religions are ultimately and fundamentally systems of cruelties) – all of that has at its origin that instinct which predicted in pain the most powerful implement of mnemonics.’ 2, III.



father and Dionysian child is a trope of classicist theatre, as discussed in a Foucauldian vein by Mitchell Greenberg. By focusing on the historical and social archeology of literary narratives, Greenberg applies Foucault's discourse analysis to the systematic symbolic sacrifice of children:

[...] in a highly patriarchal society the relation between Sovereignty in both its political forms (monarchy) and in its metaphysical imperatives (the relation between God and the world) turns [...] equally on the elevation and sublimation of the figure of the father and his destruction. No divine-right monarchy is possible without the integral backing of a theological view of the universe that unites God, Kingship and Paternity along the same metaphoric axis, establishing a universe in which the devolution of power from male to male is mediated through the sacrifice of Patriarchy's other, be it the representation of the other Woman, of the feminine that must be eliminated, or the image of the obverse of the Father's unlimited power, the child as helpless and vulnerable.<sup>152</sup>

As a follow up on the issue of health as explored in the previous section and in view of the discussions on family and social bonds in the following sections, this section intends to delve into the relativist alternative to the absolutist concepts of work and play as essentially defined in the dichotomous terms of childhood and adulthood. The implications of this age essentialism for authority, morality, and

---

<sup>152</sup> Greenberg, Mitchell, *Subjectivity and Subjugation in Seventeenth-Century Drama and Prose: The Family Romance of French Classicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 161.

family are central in the analysis of the main texts considered, that is, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, *Il nome della rosa*, and *Taxidermia*, respectively.

Children have been historically and culturally constructed as akin to inferior races and women, as argued by Diana Gittins in her discussion on childhood as a fiction:

[...] the very idea of childhood has *not* always been there, and has changed over time, just as definitions of it, and when it ends, vary between different cultures. For boys in most Western countries, for instance, beginning work full time was usually a mark of transition into adulthood, while for girls it has usually been marriage (or childbirth) that marked the transition, regardless of the age at which they married. Only in recent years has this begun to change.

Childhood, therefore, is arguably a construction, a fiction interwoven with personal memories: cultural representations that serve to disguise difference between children – whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, class or physical ability. It hides power relationships and inequality. In short, childhood has been historically constructed and needs to be understood in relation to ideas about what children should be and have meant to adults over time, and why such ideas and beliefs have changed.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>153</sup> Gittins, Diana, 'The Historical Construction of Childhood' in Mary Jane Kehily, *An Introduction to Childhood Studies* (McGraw-Hill: Open University Press, 2009), pp. 37-38.

Childhood evokes a myriad of different and even contradictory social meanings, depending on its conceptualisation from the perspective of adults.<sup>154</sup> As an attribute, the condition of childhood connotes a low social status, as the word *child* is often used to denote unmarried or childless adults.<sup>155</sup> In fact, the concept of childhood is shaped in dichotomous opposition to the sense of completion and fulfilment inherent in adulthood.<sup>156</sup> This mark of otherness makes the child both admirable and irreducibly abhorrent, according to circumstances.<sup>157</sup> As a liminal category, childhood is an inexhaustible source of sublime fantasies and grotesque associations with both appalling and appealing images.

In order to discuss the relativist import of representations of age, this section offers an analysis of a selection of literary and filmic texts where the linear narrative of children becoming adults is disrupted by images of ecstasy beyond age and related limits. The novels *Das Glasperlenspiel* and *Il nome della rosa* allow for an examination of hierarchy and ecstasy, as represented whether in a utopian aesthetic and scientific system of a remote future or in the ideal microcosm of a medieval abbey. The Hungarian film *Taxidermia* adds to the discussion a reflection on family relations, compared with the films *Das weiße Band* and *L'imbalsamatore* which present children disciplining adults and adults disciplining adolescents, respectively. The discussion is opened beyond the borders of Italy and Germany through comparisons with the Dutch poem in prose

---

<sup>154</sup> Walther, Luann, The invention of childhood in Victorian autobiography, in G. Landon (ed.) *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press (1979), p. 64.

<sup>155</sup> Gillis, John, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1790–Present*. London: Academic Press (1981), p. 1.

<sup>156</sup> Ariès, Philippe, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. ([1960] 1986), p. 125.

<sup>157</sup> Jordanova, Ludmilla, Children in history: concepts of nature and society, in G. Scarre (ed.) *Children, Parents and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1989), p. 6.

*Het carnaval der burgers*, the Portuguese novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* and the Danish and international films of the trilogy *USA – Land of Opportunity*. The relationships between these texts may display the relativist concept of ecstasy in images of age identity.

### *Metarchy vs. Hierarchy*

The symbolic contrast between age hierarchies and the metousiastic overthrowing thereof in Hesse's novel *Das Glasperlenspiel* [*The Glass Beads' Game*] allows this chapter to collect an initial reservoir of relativist images to examine. The importance of European relativism and the metarchic, that is, authority-redrawing, subversion of age conventions in Hermann Hesse's life can be observed in his *Unterm Rad* and in the succinct autobiography which he wrote when he was awarded the Nobel-prize for literature (1946, website).<sup>158</sup> Hesse belonged to a family composed of different nationalities and grew up between Germany and Switzerland. In his youth, he was always a rebel to educational institutions, which tend to repress individual personality, which he valued so high. As an adult, he manifested this non-conformism both in his stubborn struggle to realise his potential as a writer and in his choice to live in the countryside, 'far from cities and civilisation'. He loved to travel, especially to Italy and India; besides

---

<sup>158</sup> Hesse, Hermann, *Unterm Rad* (Berlin: Fischer, 1906).

Nietzsche and other western philosophers, he was very much influenced by the Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions. His life and thought are emblematic of the relativistic strand of European identity, emerged from the complex dialectics between different cultures and resulting in a great openness to exploring always new realities.

It was exactly his supranational, European relativism that made his fight against the totalitarian absolutism of German nationalism inevitable. He was a declared enemy of the Nazi regime and overcame the traumata caused by the news of the horrors of the Second World War by creating the utopian world of the novel *Das Glasperlenspiel*. Hermann Hesse has a remarkable stature in twentieth-century European literature (Ziolkowski, 2002, p. 61). His literary features include a critical attitude towards education and social repression, the re-elaboration of direct life experiences, the grouping of characters into opposing couples, the use of *alter ego*, and the idea that salvation is only possible by evading in the existential dimension of the artist (Koester, 1994, p. 313). He can be regarded as a ‘post-modern “missionary”’ (p. 314) for the fusion of European and Asian philosophical conceptions, engaged as he was in contemporary issues even in his historical novels. Equally concerned with contemporary issues, though more a development and utopian novel than a historical one, *Das Glasperlenspiel* is the last novel that he wrote. No synthesis or analysis can do justice to the infinite facets of this monumental literary enterprise, in which the European relativism hovering over Hesse’s life and thought finds eloquent and breath-taking artistic expression.

Against the disturbing background of the chaos that dominated in Germany and Europe at that time, Hesse fled into a Platonic dream of order and peace, an ideally perfect cosmos in a world beyond reality. The contours of this imaginary dimension are so blurred that any more or less detailed account of the novel can only reflect the vagueness and incommensurability that leave the functioning of the arcane game of the original title unclear from the start to the end of the narration, making any attempt at an intelligible synopsis inexorably vain. A juxtaposition of classical and modern elements (Michel & Michel, 1994, p. 132), *Das Glasperlenspiel* is an occult riddle.

In an era virtually located in an indefinitely remote time in the future, the eponymous *glass beads' game* is a mysterious art drawing from all realms of human knowledge that lies at the centre of an elitist autonomous province organized in a perfect hierarchy. Founded by a few enlightened spirits retired from the awful disorders of the twentieth century, this fantastic realm of science and the arts jealously keeps its independence from the secular world of power and money embodied by the State, and from the religious world of institutions like the Church. Thus, the cosmos conceived by the novelist consists of three distinct worlds: the world of politics and economy, the world of religion, and the world of the intellectual and artistic game.

In this poetical setting, the individual development of a *magister ludi* (a master of the glass beads' game) takes place in a harmonious combination of discipline and creativity, abnegation and rebelliousness, absolute and relative. On the one hand, he reaches the highest position of the game's hierarchy, thus becoming the safe-guarder of the absolute order of the game; on the other hand,

deep personal experiences such as the intense contacts with one friend from the secular world and with one from the religious world open his eyes to the relativity of the game's order itself. Finally, the *magister ludi* resigns from his position and opens up to the diversity of reality. His sublime self-overcoming discloses an ecstasy where the child-like playfulness of the glass beads' game surpasses the adult solemnity of the hierarchical system intended to preserve order.

The relationships between genuine Dionysian genius and ingenious Apollonian order are central in the poetical essay *Het carnaval der burgers*, where the Dutch author Menno ter Braak argued that the poet and the citizen, embodying the dichotomies of originality and convention, individuality and impersonality, life and fossilisation, artifice and facts, need each other in order to define themselves in relation to each other. A comparison between this text and Hesse's novel may expand on the overcoming of age essentialism in sublime ecstasy. In Ter Braak's use of a Hegelian dialectical structure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, *taaltwijfel* (language-doubt) prevents the possibility of any dialectical closure, as the overcoming of stylistic forms in the expression of individual personality questions all commonly accepted concepts in always provisory literary texts which can only convey the paradox of the impossibility of language to give any definitive accounts (Huygens & Van Bork). It is not by chance that paradox is a constant literary device in the oeuvre of Menno ter Braak. As a literary critic he was interested in German *Exil-Literatur* exactly as an important occasion to reflect on such paradoxes as those related to the tension between the individual and the community.

Ter Braak's activity benefited from the important contributions of his friendship with the intellectual Du Perron and of the discovery of Nietzsche's philosophy (Huygens & Van Bork). In his masterpiece *Politicus zonder partij*, he engages in a Nietzschean unmasking of the selfishness of deceptively altruistic higher values and opposes them to his ideal of honesty. In a similarly Nietzschean vein, his analysis in *Van oude en nieuwe Christenen* unmask the continuity of the Christian resentful value of equality in modern political ideologies, as articulated in *Het nationaal-socialisme als rancuneleer*. His embracement of democracy in nationalist times has to do with his intellectual opportunism, which was his personal *escamotage* to always resist conformation (Huygens & Van Bork). In 1940, as soon as this was no longer possible owing to the Nazi occupation, he committed suicide.

*Het carnaval der burgers* (1930) discusses and represents the dialectics of contestation. As the subtitle suggests, this is possible in the skilful concatenation of an array of metaphors within the unifying metaphor of the carnival. The opposition between carnival and Ashes' Wednesday symbolizes the eternal reciprocal contestation of poetical drives and social conventions. Far from annihilating their antithetical relationship, the synthesis provides their Hegelian *Aufhebung*, as the two principles correspond to each other exactly by virtue of their enmity to each other. Actually, the poets are citizens, as their poetical drives contest and, thus, rest on the conventions of the citizens. Similarly, the citizens are poets, as their conventions contest and, hence, rely upon poetical drives. Behind the masks, an ironic grimace betrays that the herd is wild and, vice versa, the wild



is gregarious. The contestation ensuing from the friction between these terms moves the dialectics of the citizens' carnival.

The overarching metaphor of carnival finds articulation in the masks of the children, the lovers, the believers, the citizens, and the poets. The carnival of the children is a paradise soon lost, as their simple drives and unruly imagination are soon tamed with the imposition of the conventions sanctioned in language. The social taming of the wild in the herd continues with the imposition of exclusive and contractual love, the religious belief in a divine entity to which everything that escapes convention is delegated, and the civil loyalty to the state. The heavenly carnival is only accessible thanks to the poetical contestation of conventions. The conventions of the citizens are themselves the means for the poetical contestation of the unruly on Ashes' Wednesday, from language and marriage to religion and civilization, in whose further contestation the poets regain the paradise of carnival.

The civico-poetical contestation of the unruly aims to self-conservation by means of possession (p. 69). In fact, language sanctions conventional possession by assigning names which define the boundaries of possession, without which possession is impossible. Sanctioning and sanctifying and dogmatizing (*heiligen, dogmatiseren*) allow for self-conservation. Education and morality, thus, control the unruly. Linguistic utterances contest the injustice of transiency with the imposition of names, boundaries, conventions.

The doctor and the priest alike need be sanctioned as inviolable magicians for the sake of civic possession (p. 71). The citizens' contestation of transiency encloses the environment into the categories of science, medicine and technology,

and relegates all that is left uncontrollable to the mystery of the transcendental. Eventually, the entire environment is sanctioned and mystified, either in the laws of science or in the dogmata of religion and magic. In this way, the possession attained in contestation and the social authorities of the herd detaining civic powers are made inviolable, holy, sacred.

Instead of accomplishing anything like an actual demystification of this civic ideology, the disbelief of modern enlightened criticism actually perpetuates the dogma of self-conservation thanks to the setting of, again, sacred boundaries (pp. 79-80). The new social authority of the citizens as individuals with the power to possess their own beliefs continues to contest the arbitrary, exactly as morality and religion do. Again, the citizen contests transiency by drawing the boundaries of possession, meanwhile detained by the authority of the individual. The citizens' carnival's contestation continues, as self-conservation is atomized.

Self-conservation is a major concern in the mind of the ideal creator of the glass beads' game in Hesse's novel. Terrified by the outcome of the civilization of the European nation-states, the creator of the game wants to establish a new order to provide the security of belonging to an absolute system without degenerating in violence. Nation and state give man a soil full of roots of which he is a fibre (Hesse, 1943, p. 493), but easily fall into the totalitarian trap, from which the game order is immune by virtue of its relativistic melange of as disparate disciplines as music and mathematics. The game itself, abolishing all clear-cut distinctions between different fields of life, is a relativistic interplay of contrasting forces harmoniously arranged by the player. The very idea of the game suggests that the selection of some pieces of reality and their juxtaposition in an absolute

system is arbitrary, nothing but a game. Playing like children wearing the legitimating mask of adulthood, leaders and dominators succeed one another in world history striving for power for the sake of 'good' only to be eventually overwhelmed by their own power and love it for its own sake:

Es war schön und hatte etwas Verlockendes, Macht über Menschen zu haben und vor andern hervorzuglänzen, aber es hatte auch eine Dämonie und Gefahr, und die Weltgeschichte bestand ja aus einer lückenlosen Reihe von Herrschern, Führern, Machern und Befehlshabern, welche mit unendlich seltenen Ausnahmen alle hübsch begonnen und übel geendet, welche alle [...] um des Guten willen nach der Macht gestrebt hatten, um nachher von der Macht besessen und betäubt zu werden und sie um ihrer selbst willen zu lieben.<sup>159</sup> (p. 143)

The sole escape is the awareness of the game-like, relative nature of the undertaking to order reality, the recognition that reality is over and again constructed like a work of art. This ecstatic dimension is attained through the renunciation to the deceptively safe order of solemn adulthood.

The utopian relativistic system does not lead to violence and, yet, gives reality a unity that provides an ecstatic feeling of security, as for the *weatherman* in the story of the magister ludi (p. 497). The balance between wonder and order is the ideal remedy to the human need for the illusion of having control upon

---

<sup>159</sup> 'It was beautiful and appealing to have power on people and shine before others, but it was demoniac and dangerous, too, and world history consisted of a seamless series of dominators, leaders, makers and commanders, who had all – with extremely rare exceptions – started well and ended badly, who had all striven for power for good purposes, only to subsequently be possessed and numbed by power and love it for its own sake'.

things. In the game, the player only indulges in the dream of absolute order to eventually wake up and find himself in a new constellation, not closer to truth but more aware of his own position in relation to the ‘momentary condition of things’ (pp. 418-419). This is only possible if he accepts that ‘(a)lles widerspricht einander, alles läuft aneinander vorbei, nirgends ist Gewissheit’ (‘each thing contradicts the other, each thing eludes the other, nowhere is certainty’, p. 85).

The game system is, nonetheless, utopian. The obstinate seclusion of the Platonic province from the rest of the world is doomed to failure, contradictory as it is with the relativistic view of things as inextricably interrelated on which the game is based. The strict hierarchy and rules of the happy kingdom eventually oppress the *magister ludi*, who decides to evade from a dream turned into a nightmare. In fact, the game was supposed to be a shelter from the horrors of the twentieth century, but it established an absolute order that chokes individual personalities with a tacitly repressive education. This tension between community and individual, absolute and relative, Plato and Nietzsche, is a *Leitmotiv* in Hesse and in European civilization.

Hesse has his fantastic vision in the slumber of Europe in the middle of war. Like the novel by Juli Zeh in the previous chapter, *Das Glasperlenspiel* suggests that all absolute systems, from the nineteenth-century nation-states even to an ideal order, are irredeemably oppressive. The sole chance for salvation is the liberation of the game from the strict structures of power that imprison it, the lucidly made decision to flee into the multifarious dimension of art, and the embracement of relativist motion.

This aesthetic dimension is explored in Ter Braak's text. Other than in the demand of possession advanced through contestation, being is beauty (*schoonheid*), presence (*heden*), poetry (*dichterlijk*), and totality (*alles*), whereas within the boundaries set for self-conservation being is decaying, divided, distinguished, differentiated as pretty or ugly (*mooi of lelijk*), close or far (*nabij of ver*), poetical or civic (*dichterlijk of burgerlijk*), this or that entity (*dit of dat*) (p. 119). Self-conservation, thus, relies on the contestation of the unruly, occult transiency of being. Paradoxically, being involves the contestation of being for the continuation of being. The beautiful and poetical unity of all as a whole undergoes the contestation which, by distinguishing the parts of the whole, challenges their arbitrary momentary being and, thereby, conserves them. In this respect, the relativist centrality of the overcoming of essentialist dichotomies in the citizens' carnival invokes a digression regarding Menno ter Braak's reception of cultural historian Johan Huizinga's *Homo ludens* not merely as an essay, but actually as the enthralling, yet self-betraying novel of the Nietzschean revaluation of *spel en ernst*, that is, play and seriousness (1951). The theory that all activity, no matter how serious, from language to politics and science, is at bottom nothing but play unfolds in the narration of the conventionalization of the seriousness of particular forms of play in contrast to others, with a suspense which is finally annihilated in the reaffirmation of seriousness as nonetheless fundamental and as the ultimate goal of play. Ter Braak's critique of Huizinga hints at the indissoluble intertextual relationship between the former's holistic relativism contesting all dichotomous oppositions and the latter's all-encompassing theory of activity as play. The citizen's carnival represents the metousiastic dramatisation of play's seriousness

in a Nietzschean relativism where, beyond good and evil, from children to poets and from language to politics, science and the arts, everything participates in the one playful whole.

Further in the citizens' carnival, the ambivalence of nature and culture manifests itself in the citizens' romantic love of nature, by virtue of which they, on the one hand, poetize nature and, on the other hand, follow set conventions within set boundaries and conditions (p. 123). The citizens' civic and cultural contestation distinguishes between culture as civic and nature as poetical. Thus, nature discloses the poetical to the citizen thanks to its civic and cultural distinction as poetical. The citizens engage in poetry within the civic and cultural boundaries which they draw.

The citizens' love of nature is a 'contradictio in terminis', as it actually spoils nature (p. 125). In fact, love implies a fusion between the parts involved whereby they lose their being as distinct entities. As soon as the citizens love nature, they make it lose its being as nature and gain civic, cultural properties. Their love manifests itself, paradoxically, in the contestation which enables them to draw the boundaries of poetical nature. The poetry of the citizens dwells in the conventions fixed in their civic contestation.

The difference and similarity between citizens and poets lies in the latter's drawing of unconventional boundaries for the disclosure of poetical meanings, without passively relying on the former's conventions which, e.g., sanction the poetical beauty of particular natural spots attracting travellers (pp. 128-129). On the one hand, the poets discover the beauty of all kinds of entities, regardless of the distinction between pretty and ugly made in civic and cultural contestation. On

the other hand, this happens as they engage themselves in the, again, civic and cultural contestation of the arbitrary boundaries drawn by the citizens, with the creation of yet more and new boundaries. Namely, the poets engage in civic and cultural contestation through their very own poetry. Civic partisanship poetizes by making conventional distinctions of good and evil parts, and, like partisanship, poetry poetizes by making distinctions, but without pursuing conventions: rather uncovering in the whole of being the goodness of all kinds of entities, regardless of conventional distinctions of good and evil.

While all morals are inexorably civic by virtue of their content's 'factual weight' (*feitelijke zwaarte*) (p. 133), the carnival's moral finds its relativism, far from any nihilistic abstractness, exactly in the positivity and, yet, revocability of its utterances beyond the boundaries set in civic and cultural contestation (p. 136). This relativism posits distinctions of good and evil which participate in the civic contestation of the occult transiency in the whole of being. Yet, as soon as sides are taken, new different boundaries are drawn, which revoke and redefine the distinctions made. Thus, participation in and further contestation of civic contestation fuel each other.

This paradoxical moral rests on the awareness that the only alternative to self-contradiction and hyper-contestation is silence, as knowledge of life is possible only through abstraction, although life itself is never abstract (pp. 137-138). The appropriation of the environment by drawing boundaries for self-conservation abstracts the occult transiency of being. The abstraction of utterance is both the contradiction of being and the only way to prolong being by means of self-conservation. This occurs exactly in the contestation of the occult transiency

of being which is possible in the abstraction of utterance. With the awareness of such a carnival of deceitful masks, the carnival's moral is a poetical relativism which participates in partisan contestation and, yet, time and again contradicts its own utterances with ever more different abstractions.

In fact, the carnival's moral departs from the acceptance of the inevitability of the civic form, which makes it, indeed, the carnival of the citizens (p. 142). The abstraction of form provides the only alternative to nothingness. Only with utterances is it possible to possess, and only with utterances is the escape from possession possible at all; the overcoming (*overwinnen*) offered in the carnival's moral implies both the continuation and the contestation of all forms and morals (p. 143). As soon as the relativists recognize themselves as citizens, they can contest convention in the carnival.

Poetry and life are "*sacer*" both as holy, for their animation of abstract forms, and as cursed, for their dooming of abstraction to transiency (pp. 152-153). Being and its poetical contestation resolve themselves in the utterances and texts which, once conventional, enable self-conservation. Conversely, their abstract solutions are doomed by virtue of their very abstractness to pass away and give way to always new poetical solutions in the contestation of being. With the awareness of this ambivalence, it is possible to embrace in poetry the relativist sacralizing contestation of the civic carnival, beyond the alienation of Ashes' Wednesday.

The narrative of renunciation to adulthood shows that the mysterious game of Hesse's novel involves precisely the self-reflexive abstraction of textual utterances in poetical creativity and critique discussed by Ter Braak. *Het carnal*



*der burgers* and *Das Glasperlenspiel* display the linear narrative of children becoming adults only to displace it through sublime images of ecstasy and bliss. Both the *magister ludi* and civic poets are characterized by recourse to the metaphor of the *puer aeternus*. Far from crystallizing their identities according to age conventions of solemn adulthood, players and poets embrace ecstasy as children ever redefining the rules of their creative and critical game. Play and poetry create their order by destroying authority and destroy conventions by creating meaning in ever different shapes.

#### *Exploring Metarchic Labyrinths*

The metousiastic overthrowing of age conventions represented by Hesse is echoed in later anti-essentialist novels, such as Eco's *The Name of the Rose* to which we now turn. 'Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus': the last words of Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* cyclically lead back to the title and give the key to decipher the hieroglyphic vicissitudes that are intertwined in this literary work. If there is no primordial 'rose' outside of the name given unto the real entity designated by that name, and all one is left with is a plurality of names, then there cannot be one single universal Good, Truth, God; there must rather be many possible interpretations. Yet, is this polymorphic dimension of names not in strident contradiction with the intrinsic property of names to crystallize reality into one fixed, absolute form? Similarly, the concept of Divinity, alias the Sacred,

involves, on the one hand, an absolute idea that can be called ‘God’ and, on the other hand, the relativity and variety of Gods envisioned by a Nietzschean perspectivist outlook, wherein everyone finds different meanings of life drawing inspiration from religion, and more generally from the arts and culture. This conception castrates and beheads the absolute ideal of the Father, leaving the children with no linear narrative of adulthood, but rather the labyrinthine play of multiple interpretations.

It is no coincidence that the library of the majestic abbey in Eco’s novel is exactly a labyrinth, as the absolute order cherished by the monks dissolves into the ambiguities of the mysterious murders. In the present discussion, the opposition between abbey and labyrinth deserves to be examined as a variation on the counterpoint of adulthood and childhood. The imagery of sacred myth as opposed to playful disenchantment adds the dimension of kinship as divine kingship to the deconstruction of age essentialism. The transcendent family of God Father and His human children expected to attain spiritual and moral adulthood through devotion constitutes a cultural image where the ideology of age finds metaphysical legitimacy.

The Sacred is all that which man regards as highest, possibly involving also a divine entity. On the one hand, the Sacred provides myth, the illusion of one transcendent absolute truth. On the other hand, myth is disenchanted as soon as the illusion of the Sacred is confronted with the complexity of reality, and disenchantment with one myth, in turn, leads to the emergence of a new myth. Myth and disenchantment are so inextricably interlaced that it can be hard to distinguish them. However, the distinction between myth and disenchantment is

implicitly posited as clear-cut in Karen Armstrong's account of the loss of the Sacred in modern times.<sup>160</sup> Her readings offer a useful overview on myth and disenchantment. Her analysis of shared understandings of religious texts is particularly well-crafted. While successfully managing to increase awareness of the value of myth as a way to give a meaning to life, she fails to acknowledge that the opposite extremes of myth and disenchantment touch each other. Concerned as she is with defending myth in disenchanted times, she indulges in a dichotomous discourse in which the happy scenario of ancient myths is contrasted to the modern wasteland of disenchantment. It is possible to nuance her picture by pondering over the representation of myth and disenchantment in religion, more specifically medieval Christianity, in *The Name of the Rose*. This issue complements the discussion on authority and critique in the novel *Das Glasperlenspiel*. In Eco's text, the metaphor of ecstatic childhood is deployed in connection with the tension between blissful laughter and religious solemnity.

A fruitful way to proceed is by interpreting the representation of Christianity in the novel within the theoretical framework of the relevant ideas of the Italian poet and writer Giacomo Leopardi (1789-1837). Far from intending to engage with this writer's poetry, a suitable point of reference is the assessment of his prose made by the philosopher Emanuele Severino. As the first Western thinker who called into question all absolute truths according to some commentators (Severino, 1997, p. 116), Leopardi was a sharp analyst of religion's, especially Christianity's, oscillation between myth and

---

<sup>160</sup> Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).

disenchantment.<sup>161</sup> Taking Leopardi's conceptual insights as our starting point, the representation of this ambivalence in *The Name of the Rose* will be discussed, first, by focusing on the mythical character of the Christian religion. Then, emphasis will be laid upon its disenchanting dimension. Finally, the way in which myth and disenchantment merge and confound with each other will be examined. Throughout this examination, comparisons with the image of light and blindness in the novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* by José Saramago will expand on the labyrinthine dissolution of absolute truth.<sup>162</sup> By thus interpreting the representation of Christianity in Eco's novel, some light can be shed on the slippery boundary between myth and disenchantment, alias adult solemnity and childish play.

Freud argued that religion 'was born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood' (1927, p. 18). Man is regarded by Freud as a prey to the drives of his own uncontrollable unconscious already from his childhood. As an adult, he has to come to terms with his incapability to control himself, let alone the world that surrounds him. Therefore, he elaborates on the unconscious fears of his childhood and makes his condition as a prey to his own unconscious tolerable by projecting all his impossible desires of power and control onto the figure of an omnipotent God. In this sense, religion is the man-made illusion of the existence of an absolute order, which makes it possible for man to tolerate the chaos of his unconscious. Over one century before Freud,

---

<sup>161</sup> Whether he was the first challenger of all absolute truths or not, this assessment is neither endorsed, nor rejected in this enquiry. All this discussion does is acknowledge that such assessment has been put forward by others.

<sup>162</sup> Geroldo Richter, Nanci, *Os espaços infernais e labirínticos em Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (São Paulo, 2007), p. 121

Leopardi presented religion as an illusion, too. Anticipating Freud, Leopardi explained religion as a consolation to man for his natural unhappiness. This aspect of religion has much to do with its mythical character. Like a myth, religion enables man to give meaning to his existence and, thus, relieves man from his existential condition dominated by the terrifying feeling that nothing can be fully controlled.

In *The Name of the Rose*, the architectural proportions of the abbey and the subdivision of the days into hours of prayer reflect a superior harmony in which every part plays a precise role in the ordered whole. In the novel, religion is presented as the existential opportunity for man to be happy in feeling that he is a part, albeit a tiny and impotent one, in the cosmic pattern of God's will. This can be seen in light of Leopardi's idea of religion as *mythos*. Leopardi went so far as to proclaim that religion is the greatest possible happiness for man in this life, that is, the greatest possible relief from natural unhappiness (Severino, p. 160).

Leopardi had an ambivalent conception of nature, which would deserve a much longer discussion in its own right. The thinker came to the conclusion that man's natural condition is one of unhappiness and suffering. Happiness itself is only an unachievable and unattainable illusion, namely man's dream of a condition different from his natural unhappiness. There is no possibility for man to really escape from his unhappiness, only the chance to temporarily forget this miserable state. In order to momentarily turn away from his natural condition of inescapable grief, man can only find short relief in his imagination that distracts him from hard reality. The greatest possible relief from his natural unhappiness is the one of which the distracting effect lasts longest, namely religion. In fact, religion makes

the illusion of God linger in time by appealing to man's faith, or his capability to believe unconditionally, even in something to which he has no access at all. Thus, religion is man's greatest happiness, and as man's happiness is only the illusion of a life different from the unhappy one bestowed upon him by nature, it follows that religion is the greatest possible illusion. In this regard, religion works as a myth; it is an invention that gives man the chance to come to terms with his life and be *happy*. As the only possible happiness is illusion and, hence, myth (in the sense that happiness as such is actually impossible in reality), the mythical lore provided by religion is the greatest possible happiness for man.

In *The Name of the Rose*, the building of the abbey translates the illusion of religion into mathematical perfection. It is an eight-angle building that looks as quadrangular in the distance, with three orders of windows at its sides and four towers at four of its angles, each tower having seven angles of which five can be seen from the outside (Eco, 1980, p. 29). Eight is a symbol of perfection, four the number of the gospels, five the zones of the world, seven the gifts of the Holy Spirit: these are the numbers by which the monks consecrated the abbey to God with their 'illusory will' (p. 30). The illusory will of man to find relief in religion pervades the whole novel. The illusion of religion is the arcane mist that shrouds in a veil of mystery the inexhaustible world of meanings and interpretations disclosed by the numerous pages that make up the literary text. Not only the majestic geometrical shapes of the abbey, but also the subdivision of the days into hours of prayer and the distribution of work among the Benedictines create the illusion that everything and everyone is an integral, functional part of a beautiful whole designed by the all-mighty Christian God. From the harmonious numbers

and miniatures disseminated throughout the book to the characters striving for consensus on the word of God, everything tends to unity in Eco's novel. The illusion of religion is the very movement animating the unfolding of the novel's multiple narrative and semantic layers.

The abbey can be seen as an allegory of the illusion of religion. In a historical context in which bloody conflicts divide both the Empire and the Church, the abbey is the place where the intellectual elite gather to struggle for a unitary vision of the divine order. The shadow of heresy is cast everywhere, as the fear of dissidence expands; it is only by embracing the illusion of religion that the characters find the strength to keep on fighting the battle of life in such a miserable condition of fratricidal hatred. In light of Leopardi's insights, Eco's representation of medieval Christianity takes on fascinating shades. In his literary abbey, as in Leopardi's fruitful mind, religion is the greatest possible happiness for man. Far from enjoying their intellectual naivety, spiritual modesty, and bodily pleasures, the poor people who live outside the abbey are all but happy. Their state is one of utter misery, moral and material. Only the light of religion can make the lives of charismatic preachers, scattered here and there in the intricate constellation of interactions in the abbey, shine bright with the blissful happiness of the religious illusion. These men who consecrated their lives to religion are the only ones to which the higher condition of bliss is reserved. This does not involve happiness other than as an illusion, namely the illusion of religion. The state of bliss that they obtain can only be described as a condition of noble detachment and aloofness from the realm of the mundane, with the natural unhappiness which it implies. In *The Name of the Rose*, the greatest happiness consists in the illusion

of the Sacred and the embracing of the mythical dimension that it bears with it. Charismatic monks like Ubertino da Casale and, old and wise at the moment of writing the story, the narrator Adso himself live their lives in the myth of the Christian God, in whose design every horror and pain have a meaning and can, therefore, be tolerated in bliss. It is to this ideal that the whole community within the abbey aspires, while participating in the tiresome activities prescribed by the Benedictine order, living to the edifying rhythm of the hours of prayer, and, ultimately, being integral part of the abbey, of which the geometrical proportions constantly remind them that God defines the meaning of their existence.

The order of the abbey is contrasted to the chaos of the labyrinth. While *Il nome della rosa* keeps the infernal character of the library implicit, it is possible to lay bare the infernal connotations of postmodern literary labyrinths in a succinct comparison to *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, which stages an epidemic of blindness whose victims are isolated in an eerie architectural space where:

[...] havia mais camaratas, mas os poucos que ficaram sem cama tinham medo de perder-se no labirinto que imaginavam, salas, corredores, portas fechadas, escadas que só se revelariam no último momento. Por fim, compreenderam que não poderiam continuar ali e, buscando penosamente a porta por onde haviam entrado, aventuraram-se no desconhecido.<sup>163</sup> (p. 73)

---

<sup>163</sup> ‘there were more bedrooms, but the few [blind] who ended up with no bed were afraid to get lost in the labyrinth that they imagined, halls, corridors, locked doors, stairs that would reveal their presence only out of a sudden. Eventually, they realised that they could not walk on there and, tiresomely looking for the door through which they had come in, they ventured into the unknown’.



The text sets up a hell on earth which represents the monstrosities borne out of the blinding passion of absolute truth. *Il nome della rosa* makes use of the same symbolic image of the labyrinthine space with the converse function, that is, to suggest the possibility to overcome the passion of absolute truth in the appreciation of the world as a labyrinth where no fatherly commandments help and meaning is redefined over and again as in child-like play. In order to expose this question, it is necessary to turn to the concepts of universal and critical reason, in relation to the images of the abbey and the labyrinth.

Rather than relying on illusions, human happiness can be grounded in reason. In Kant's philosophical system, man has to elevate himself to the categorical imperative of his reason, of which the author is God (Kant, 1793, section 1.A). Rationality and sacredness are reconciled in Kant's ethics by attributing the content of human reason to God, although elsewhere in Kant's work God is posited as a product of pure reason. In this moral system, man reaches happiness by virtue of his unity with God, as he has to follow the categorical imperative of behaving as everyone ought to. This rational law is not established by man himself, as everyone is endowed with reason and has, therefore, the ability to think in universal terms; it follows, in Kant's view, that the categorical imperative must be the work of God (*ibidem*). Leopardi put Kant's ethics on its head. Rather than the author of the content of universal reason, God is regarded by Leopardi as the aberrant outcome of man's critical reason. This disenchantment is not in contradiction with the mythical face of religion from which Leopardi's thought departed; it is rather its ultimate, radical, and extreme consequence. That disenchantment goes hand in hand with myth can be seen in a

brief sketch of a few significant features of the library and the character of William in *The Name of the Rose*. An interpretation of the representation of the disenchanting dimension of religion in these central figures can gain much from the application of Leopardi's conceptual insights on the relationship between religion and rationality.

After defining religion as the greatest consolation, Leopardi declared religion to be the most barbarous thing that man could conceive and the greatest damage of life, as it was born out of a monstrous deployment of reason (Severino, p. 184). In fact, reason is man's capability to find ways to cope with his natural unhappiness, and as religion is the greatest consolation, then it must derive from man's reason. More specifically, religion derives from the paradoxical use of reason against itself, as religion is an illusion generated by reason, whereas reason should lead to the end of all illusions. Therefore, religion is the greatest damage of life *because* it (rationally) relieves from unhappiness with the greatest possible illusion (which is irrational by definition). The further implication of Leopardi's reasoning is that religion offers the mythical illusion to relieve man from his natural unhappiness, but it also bears in itself the seeds of rational disenchantment from its own illusion. This is so by virtue of the rational character of religion's undertaking to relieve man from his miserable condition. Once man has embraced the illusion of religion to tolerate his helplessness, he can subsequently abandon such an illusion with the awareness of its detraction from rationality, which involves his capability to find ways to cure his unhappiness.

On the one hand, the abbey of *The Name of the Rose* represents the mythical dimension of the religious illusion. On the other hand, its labyrinthine

library represents religion's inherent self-destructively disenchanting power. It is no coincidence that the most rational character, William, is so fascinated by the mystery of the library-labyrinth. He senses more than anyone else that the world is beautiful not only by virtue of unity in diversity, but also because of diversity in unity (Eco, p. 24). The order that the human mind imagines, such as the religious illusion, is like a ladder, which was built for the purpose of reaching something and must be thrown away afterwards, as one finds out that, though it worked, it was meaningless. The overall movement towards unity in the novel disperses into the infinity of details and possible interpretations that it displays. William highly values the library because it is there that all the texts are kept, including those which diverge from the standard teaching of the word of God. He sees its value as an infinite conveyor of alternative ways to reach the illusion of God. With his rationality, William constantly challenges all prejudiced assumptions, always coming to new, precious insights. Putting aside his faith, he uses his reason to discover the chain of dreadful events unleashed by the keepers of the secrets of the library.

Nonetheless, he is never completely sure of the truth of his reconstructions of facts. When Adso remarks that the abbey is like a microcosm that reflects the macrocosm's unity in diversity, William notices that for the world to have a mirror, it should have a shape (p. 127). Like the shapeless library, the world does not have an overarching order, as William suggests. Every time William uses his rational powers and comes up with an account of reality, it can never be more than one of the infinite possible interpretations, as he himself explains to Adso. Applying Leopardi's conceptual insights, the disenchantment that ensues from the

intrinsic contradiction of the religious ‘rational illusion’ does not make one get rid of the myth of religion in favour of some objective truth attainable through reason. Rather than jettisoning its mythical counterpart, the disenchanting dimension of religion opens up the thinking mind to the relativity of every truth and the plurality of the Gods, as every account of reality amounts to a different form of illusion which offers a different way to deal with man’s natural unhappiness.

As Karen Armstrong convincingly argued, rationalism has disenchanted the world from the mythical lore of religion. This has unleashed the ‘battle for God’, which is ‘an attempt to fill the void at the heart of a society based on scientific rationalism’ (2001, p. 370). In fact, ‘human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation’, yet the ‘idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God’ (1993, p. 399). Armstrong also claimed that ‘fundamentalists have turned the mythos of their religion into logos’ (2001, p. 366). Thus, she fails to acknowledge that mythos and logos are actually two sides of the same coin. That this is the case is implicit in the very scope of her argumentation, but she underemphasises this aspect to focus on other ones which are more functional to her thesis. However, to ponder over the interrelation of myth and disenchantment can only add to the quality of the points that she makes, and open new avenues of reflection. This nuance can be appreciated by applying Leopardi’s relativism to the representation of fundamentalism in *The Name of the Rose*.

In Leopardi’s view, Christianity only cured life by destroying it, humiliating it, and aspiring to the perfect man outside of it (Severino, p. 243). Actually, in their absolute relativity, all possible beings are absolutely perfect, that is, perfect in themselves (p. 76). As there is no external ideal of perfection for

comparison, everything is perfect in itself by virtue of the absolutely relative character of its being. Leopardi denies all eternal and absolute principles for the first time in Western thought, according to Severino (p. 116). He explains the development of civilization as moved by chance, as there is no *telos* or aim towards which history tends (p. 387). Nature is the will to exist, as all things born (*nate*) are kept alive as long as they manifest their will to be (p. 389). Life can be explained by denying all absolute truths (p. 425): ‘word is an interpreting illusion; and illusion is a linguistic interpretation; and interpretation is a linguistic illusion’ (p. 91). The truth that one attains by interpreting the world is not absolute, but relative to language, which in turn creates the illusion of truth. Far from having an end to achieve, history is moved by the chanceful interaction of the will to exist of various different beings, who interpret the world by creating the illusion of truth through language. Hence, everything is relative to the many beings crowding the world and each one of them is relative to the other. Thus, the myth of the Christian absolute God prevents one from realising that there is no absolute truth to which one can aspire for happiness, whereas everyone could find their own way to cope with natural unhappiness. Diversity can, thus, be enjoyed and people can join the laughter of the Gods at the illusion of one absolute Being, that is, of any ideal of adulthood to fulfil in the light of the Father.

It is in light of these ideas of Leopardi’s that it is possible to interpret William’s final awareness that the only truth lies in learning to free oneself from the insane passion for truth (p. 494), at the end of *The Name of the Rose*. His appreciation of laughter in contrast to Jorge can be seen as a representation of two different attitudes to the mythical-disenchanting ambivalence of the religious

rational illusion. On the one hand, William's Leopardian relativism enables him to see the illusion of religion and still draw from it inspiration for life, while he uses his rationality to discover always new possibilities. On the other hand, Jorge's rationally calculated censorship of laughter amounts to the attempt to live with the illusion of religion by hiding its deceptive character. Far from being blind to the illusion of religion, Jorge sees way too well how the uplifting laughter of Aristotle's taboo book reveals that all absolute truths are deceitful. Thus, the blind/clairvoyant monk uses his rational powers to set up a devilish plan to keep the book concealed, which costs the lives of so many dwellers of the abbey. In this sense, he is a fundamentalist who turns mythos into logos as in Armstrong's account. However, it is fallacious to put fundamentalism in these terms; what can be seen in the fundamentalist Jorge is not mythos being turned into logos, but rather the rational dimension of the religious myth growing monstrously into a logical system for the preservation of the mythical truth and the elimination of the disenchanting threat.

On the other side of the spectrum, the Franciscan monk William draws vital energy from God's revealed truth, while following the disenchanting paths of reason to discover Jorge's secret and to open himself to the philosophical laughter that questions all absolute truths. Although he embraces wholeheartedly the Christian faith, he asserts on all occasions the relativity of all beings, as in Leopardi's thought. He faces the ambivalence of the religious illusion without trying to hide its disenchantment, yet embracing its myth. He realises how precious the library of the abbey is. The library of the abbey can be seen as the disenchanting logos intrinsic to any mythical absolute systems, which contain the

seeds of their own relativist questioning. Furthermore, the books inside the library represent both the chance to challenge religious dogmas and the source of positive values which do not fall into dogmatism or, ultimately, fundamentalism. In its Leopardian relativism, Eco's novel joins Armstrong's claim that:

A novel, like a myth, teaches us to see the world differently [...] If professional religious leaders cannot instruct us in mythical lore, our artists and creative writers can perhaps step into this priestly role and bring fresh insight to our lost and damaged world (Armstrong, 2005, p. 149).

Myth and disenchantment are both important facets of the kaleidoscope of religion. The appreciation of this nuance that Armstrong neglects can only add to her argumentation. The application of Leopardi's conception of religion as an illusion to Eco's representation of the abbey highlights that, in the novel, religion functions as a myth in giving man relief from his condition of helplessness. Looking at Eco's representation of the labyrinth in light of Leopardi's conception of religion as a paradoxical outcome of reason sheds light on the role that religion plays in the novel as a self-destructive force that can be contained by the use of rational powers.

An interpretation of Eco's representation of Jorge's fundamentalism in contrast to William's laughter from the perspective of Leopardi's relativism shows that, in the novel, there is no absolute truth; rather everything is relative. This has much to do with the slippery boundary between the mythical and the disenchanting dimensions of religion. While giving *mythos*, religion is also

disenchanted; and conversely, while disenchanted, religion also gives man *mythos*. In the labyrinth of different interpretations conjured up by the image of the library, solemn and sacred adulthood gives way to playful childhood. Arts and literature can convey myths which do not hide their disenchanting dimension and, thus, do not tend to dogmatism and fundamentalism, rather to the divine child-like laughter of culture.

### *The Vicious Circle*

The circular recreation of meaning involved in ecstasy is the relativist alternative to the vicious circle enforced by the linear narrative of adulthood. Age essentialism enforces the subjugation of children to the authority of the father until they become normalized subjects who can in turn subjugate yet more children. This chapter now moves from the exploration of this theme in novels to its counterpart in cinema. The film *Taxidermia* (2006) by György Pálfi deconstructs this discourse both through the metaphor of taxidermy as a break in the chain of subjugation and by exploiting the distancing aesthetics of artistic self-reflexion implicit in the central image of taxidermist creativity and critique. The association with taxidermy is used in a complementary way to the same critical purpose in the film *L'imbalsamatore* (2002) by Matteo Garrone, where taxidermist practices connote the very process of subjugation under a fatherly figure. Conversely, Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band – Eine Kindergeschichte*



(2010) turns to an estranging voice-over to distance the audience from the vicious circle of subjugation twirling before their eyes. A cynical voice-over is combined with more experimental distancing techniques in the stories of subjugation narrated in the films *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005) by Lars von Trier.

The vicious circle of *Taxidermia* starts with the soldier Morogorvski, reaches its peak with his son, the speed-eater Kálmán, and is broken by the third generation character, the taxidermist Lajos. The soldier is constantly humiliated by his lieutenant, in a perverse deployment of military discipline. His submission is accompanied by a reckless non-reproductive sexual activity. Only when the lieutenant's wife uses him for her pleasure in yet one more act of domination does his relentless sexuality result in a child, who exploits his appalling appetite to become a champion of speed-eating and impose his dominant character on his own child, the taxidermist, who assists him once the size of his overstuffed body imprisons him in his room. However, the taxidermist diverges from his father's discipline, unlike his grandfather who submitted to the lieutenant's games of domination. Abandoned by his son in his room, the overstuffed speed-eater dies under the attack of his voracious overstuffed cats. The taxidermist turns his father's massive carcass into a masterpiece and sets into motion a machine so as to kill himself and make an artwork out of his own corpse.

Fun in fight, food, and fate unfolds under the monstrous lens of oneiric horrors deployed in surreal narration. Grotesque irony frantically closes up and zooms in, as in a trance, on the corresponding bodily patterns of disturbing disburdening, digestion, and decease. Ejaculation, vomit, and rotting are enshrined as the haunting material symbols of disease and decay, which normative

subjectivity claims in vain to control through subjugation and abjection. Sex, eating, and bereavement are mesmerizingly associated with the object, the subject, and the abject of normalization, that is, the mother, the father, and the child, alias hierarchy, authority, and play, alias convention, reason, and wild interpretation, alias memory, identity, and otherness, respectively. Bestial rape, cannibalistic hunting, and ritual sacrifice are the implements of normative memory surreptitiously evoked by this bizarre tribal imagery. Sinister, lugubrious, and macabre undertones revolve around the ecstatic sublimation of the uncanny through murky irony and aesthetic suicide. Irony diverts attention from the solemn stability of reproduction and survival – suggested by the images of fight for sex and food – to the amusing metamorphosis associated with the aesthetically re-elaborated fate of death, implying change and cultural rebirth. Perversion, aversion, and diversion, that is, amusement or fun, follow one another, as though in a hypnotic sequence on the irresistibly repulsive stage of an absurdist theatre play. Absolutism, nihilism, and relativism find a grotesque orgy, gorgeous gorging, and danse macabre of compellingly concrete correlative objectives, in the hyperbolic and infernal carnival of tragicomic hybridity and hubris; in eternal laughter.

In a narrative blending revolving around fun, the grotesque tropes of fight, food, and fate are embodied by the three characters. Fighting as a soldier, Morogorvski is associated with heteronormative masculinity and ejaculation, which represents phallic male sexuality giving way to fluidity and the loss of control and inhibitions. While he fails to achieve the degree of military discipline expected of him, his son Kálmán becomes a famous champion. Paradoxically, his

triumph is associated with vomit, as speed-eating requires. The third generation character Lajos epitomizes the bizarre talents of his father and grandfather, as in his profession of taxidermy inheres the engagement with the ultimately grotesque process of putrefaction.

This narrative succession of ejaculation, vomit and rotting is related to the object, the subject, and the abject of normalization through family, that is, the mother, the father, and the child, who embody hierarchy, authority, and play, alias convention, reason, and wild interpretation, alias memory, identity, and otherness, respectively. It is no coincidence that in the first generation sexual reproduction is made possible by an act of domination on the part of the mother, who is associated with the image of a pig in the film. As Morogorvski's repulsive libido is only a passive medium for reproduction, the symbolic phallic father is actually Kálmán, whose success as a speed-eater is huge. In fact, Lajos dies childless; he incarnates the child to sacrifice in patriarchy and traditional morality. Lajos also represents the perpetuation of moral absolutism in modernity, as he actively sacrifices himself through an ingenious use of technology. His childless suicide breaks the vicious circle of subjugation through aesthetic sublimation.

Bestial rape, cannibalistic hunting, and ritual sacrifice are the grotesque images evoked by the three episodes, as the first one features sex with animals, the second one alludes to the voracious aggressiveness of the heteronormative *pater familias*, and the third one zooms in on aesthetic suicide. Sinister, lugubrious, and macabre undertones mark the three subplots, as the soldier is sinisterly retarded and dangerous, the speed-eater lugubriously dies through an excess of alimentation, and the taxidermist macabrely achieves his greatest

creation in his suicidal act. Sexual perversion, visceral aversion, and diversion from the essentialist distinction between life and death are suggested by the plot. Absolutism, nihilism, and relativism are the philosophical axes of the film. Military absolutism is exposed as ludicrous. Similarly, nihilist self-destruction is denounced as the culmination of absolutist discipline. Relativism shines triumphant in the end, as the ironic solution of aesthetic suicide hints at the possibility to create meaning out of the lowest aspects of reality. Rather than exalt the family hierarchy of age essentialism, metousiastic wisdom lies in the child's playful creativity.

*Taxidermia*, thus, condenses in superb fashion metousiastic relativism in relation to age. *L'imbalsamatore* and *Das weiße Band* offer a crucial complement in this connection. The Italian film deploys the metaphor of age essentialism as taxidermy, in contrast to that of taxidermy as age ecstasy in the Hungarian film. The meaning of age ecstasy, here, encompasses the ecstatic and revealing subversion of age illusions. The German film, then, provides a disturbing parable of children actively disciplining adults. All these different narratives compose the puzzle of age ecstasy overcoming age essentialism as relevant to metousiastic relativism and European identity in the early twenty-first century.

While the Hungarian film represents the metousiastic overcoming of age essentialism as a taxidermist's work of art, the Italian film *L'imbalsamatore* points to age ecstasy in the overcoming of essentialism as symbolized by the activity of taxidermy, which is eerily associated with mafia and patronizing hierarchy. The film portrays a young and handsome southern worker who escapes from the advances of his ugly, male shorter-than-average employer and a host of

prostitutes recruited by the evil dwarf by getting married and finding a new job in northern Italy, where he eventually kills his unrelenting stalker. Far from indulging in heteronormative and ageist perpetuation, the texts destabilizes heteronormativity and ageism by deploying conventional derogatory imagery in representations where rigid binaries and absolute truths are weakened and exposed as illusory.

As suggested by the title, this narrative revolves around the creepy figure of the middle-aged evil dwarf, who is a taxidermist also willing to perform on the corpses disseminated by the mafia. He affirms his normative power both by seeking to seduce his young apprentice – thereby reducing him to a sexual object – and by masterly staging homosocial situations, where the master and the apprentice are tied by the homosocial bond established in the sexual predation of young women. In this respect, taxidermy is an emblem of the normative essentialism of age and gender. In its crystallization of bodies in eternal and ideal objects, taxidermy is associated with the social construction of adult and male authority over adolescence and femininity or effeminacy. By metaphorically killing his master, the apprentice overcomes these oppressive hierarchies.

On a cynical note, *Das weiße Band* stresses the doom of the vicious circle whereby children come to take over the authority of adulthood and, hence, perpetuate hierarchical essentialism. While the Italian film bestows metousiastic relativism on the apprentice killing the master, the German film does not hint at any break in the vicious circle, as the haunting narration is delivered by the voice over of a young school teacher who can only observe from his relativist

perspective the perpetuation of essentialist hierarchy. In the film, age essentialism is associated with the origin of Nazism and the reproduction of violence.

The film amounts to a disturbing succession of sequences where it becomes evident that the ferocious acts of violence committed in a German village in the months leading to the First World War are to be attributed to children. A narrative zoom on the family of the church minister reveals the oppressive education to which the children are subjected. The title directs attention to the white ribbon used by the father to remind the children of their duty to avoid sin and devote themselves to purity by showing blind obedience. The children interiorize this form of oppression and engage in ruthless acts of violence intended to assert discipline in their turn. The historical setting hints at the part played by oppressive education particularly in the generation who would support Nazism and in all manifestations of violence. The only suggested alternative to becoming part of this vicious circle is critical witnessing and reporting, from the distanced perspective of metousiastic relativism.

Distancing or estrangement is the rhetorical strategy adopted to radically question the discipline of adults over children. Stylistic and conceptual distancing is central in the Scandinavian films of the cinematic movement called Dogme 95, which is worth an elaborate excursion so as to frame the manifold meanings of the Hungarian, the Italian, and the German film. The Danish Lars von Trier signed the vow of aesthetic chastity in the manifesto of Dogme 95 on Monday 13 March 1995. After only a couple of months he presented the decalogue sanctioning the cinematic chastity of the new collective of film directors at a conference for the hundredth anniversary of the film in Paris. With the provocative promise to

chastely abstain from personal taste to follow their Dogme rules, Lars von Trier and his supporters challenged the despotic system of the film industry, increasingly dominated by the Hollywood regime of special effects and cinematic illusion. The target to hit was the paradoxically dogmatic rule of bourgeois freedom to romantically express the director's individuality in the popular recipe for awful genre movies. In other words, the European collective Dogme was proposed as an antidote against the American liberal dogma, perceived as a father who teaches his children how to become adults by conforming to Hollywood aesthetics. Von Trier's recent films *Dogville* and *Manderlay* look like a brand new attack on the same old American nightmarish dream from a very different perspective than the one of Dogme 95. Actually, in the trilogy *USA – Land of Opportunity* to which these two films belong, the Dogme filmic tactic is rather being reinvented, reiterated and reinforced. It is indeed as a more refined cinematic critique that the almost completed last trilogy of films by Lars von Trier might strike the Dogme connoisseur. These two films zoom in on the overcoming of dogmatic authority through the metaphor of the father-daughter relationship.

*Dogville* and *Manderlay* definitely fall under the influence of the eccentric manifesto due to their deconstruction of individualism and filmic illusion in the adoption of distancing effects à la Brecht. Their race against good taste and aesthetic considerations feels like a chaste abstinence along Dogme lines, as well. That film directors must wear a uniform is one of the main tenets of Dogme 95. The uniform is obviously an effective military metaphor of the rules to which the film directors subscribed in order to form an avant-garde fighting the popularization of cinema. In his last trilogy, Lars von Trier wears the uniform of

Brechtian *Verfremdung*, that is, estranging the audience from the stage fiction, rather than indulging in Hollywood's cinematic illusion. All sceneries give up any realistic attempt. In fact, all places are nothing but names written on a map and a cynical voice-over presents the different chapters, where no special effects à la Spielberg are used. With this uniform, the director invites the audience to take a critical distance from what is being played and unfolds before their eyes so as to focus on the dialogues and engage in an active reflection. Actually, Lars von Trier's last trilogy involves more uniforms intertextually related to Dogme 95 than only the one worn by the director in the making of the films. At least in the first two films, the opposition between the European Dogme uniform and the American Hollywood dogma is represented at a metafictional level, where fiction reflects upon itself. The heritage of Dogme is not only in the director's distancing effects, but also somewhere in this self-reflection on cinema and making films.

It is in the elegant uniforms of Mafioso black suits that the gangsters unsuccessfully try to bribe the Dogvillean Tom into informing them if he ever sees the beautiful fugitive Grace, played by movie star Nicole Kidman in *Dogville*, released in 2003. When she arrives in the 1930s American village named after the desolate dog which welcomes her loudly, we only know that she is running away from something. Only in the film's ending are we confronted with her secret; her father is the boss of the gangsters from whom her idealism and naïve dogoodism pushes her far apart. As appropriate, Grace's sinister daddy is played by James Caan, the same actor of *The Godfather*. In his review on the *Brightlights Film Journal*, academic T.L. Putterman observed that this cinematic reminiscence takes on even more ironically godly tones in combination with the



recurring biblical analogies. Taking into account the legacy of Dogme 95, I should add that in *Dogville* the glittering uniform of the apocalyptic dark angels serving the boss is starkly contrasted with the invisible ideological uniform of hypocrisy and, indeed, American dogmatic dogmatism worn by the sinful community of the individualist villagers. In this clash of uniforms, Dogme dissidence against the Hollywood dogma is metafictionally reproduced.

The Dogvilleans embody the average American as perceived through European clichés, the magical lens through which all differences look monstrously huge in the grotesque and merciless satire of this breathtaking film. They pretend to overcome their blinkeredness by offering Grace all the opportunities available to integrate in their community, only to eventually bare their teeth and ruthlessly exploit her, economically, physically, sexually, ultimately morally. It comes as little or no surprise that their final punishment is proverbially biblical.

Challenged by Tom to improve their faulty acceptance of diversity, they give Grace the chance to seek refuge among them and put her physical labour in the service of the community, its self-celebratory self-sufficiency notwithstanding. As her religiously laden name suggests, Grace is manna from heaven for Dogville, as she represents the incarnated means for moral improvement. And vice versa she gratefully takes her opportunity in the village to make a safe life, ironically with the ultimate ambition to spare enough money to buy all the ceramic figurines she is so fond of. Playing this opportunity, she has to conform to the individualist dogma of Dogville, where everyone has to do her or his own business to make her or his own living. In the village, the sense of community is constituted in the

entwinement of the atomic individualities of the irreducibly selfish and greedy inhabitants. The film denounces satirically the drawbacks of American bourgeois liberalism underlying the Hollywood romantic individualism opposed in Dogme 95.

In fact, as soon as the police spread the news that Grace is wanted, the Dogvilleans push to the limit the underlying economic principle of compensation, whereby Grace now has to embark on much more labour and actually endure exploitation, lest she be sent away or even to prison for the bourgeois conservation of the safety of the community. This harsh regime is, again, led by the romantic Tom, though he, himself, never directly exploits Grace. Actually, he is her greatest exploiter, as he is so blinded by his naïve idealism that he ruthlessly uses her all along for his grandiosely failed patronizing illustration of Dogville's moral duty.

In this brilliant filmic parody, the grotesque irony is that her relentless sexual and moral humiliation by all of the Dogvilleans, including children and disabled, is not as hard for her as the revenge of one of her rapists' jealous wife who breaks each one of her beloved ceramic figurines in front of her uncontrollable tears. As what looked as god-given opportunities turn out to be the nightmare of the American dream, the father of Grace and Father of grace appears to ask her whether Dogville should be punished. Although she still thinks that the Dogvilleans could only be stoically accepted the way they are out of their nature, Grace inflicts her coup de grâce and agrees with the big Boss that they deserve destruction at the hand of His dark angels, Amen.

From the first film of the trilogy, the opposition between the European Dogme and the American dogma is taken to an ironically theological level of postmodern caricature. A victim of the American individualist dogma of opportunity due to her idealism, Grace undergoes an initiatory trial to finally join again her Father, in whose name the Mafia dark angels wreak havoc on and make *tabula rasa* with the sinfully individualist village. The metanarrative is that the director who, like Grace, falls prey to American bourgeois individualism can espouse true cinema only by more or less literally destroying these tendencies of mainstream cinema abhorred in Dogme 95 and embrace the discipline, like the gangsters', sanctioned in the vow of chastity. With respect to age essentialism, the film shows the power of critique based on autonomous judgment to overcome oppressive authority. Rather than indulge in her cocoon of privilege under the protection of her father, Grace explores and judges Dogville in an autonomous and critical way.

The director was starkly marked by the Dogme experience. In his interviews collected in the book *Trier on von Trier* by writer Stig Björkman, Lars von Trier himself admitted that he enjoyed so fully to work under the constraints of the vow of chastity that he has always continued to work with a hand-held camera despite the physical tiresomeness of taking the camera on his shoulders, ever since the making of his only strictly Dogme 95 film *Idioterne* soon after the establishment of the collective. As critic Achim Forst sharply observed in the German monumental work of criticism on Dogme 95 published in 2001 by Alexander Verlag Berlin with the telling subtitle 'between control and chaos', Lars von Trier's idea of the vow and the manifesto sprang from the necessity to

counter the liberalist cinematic tendencies which have ended up in the opposite of liberty, that is, in the exploitation of the director's work. To break free from this despotic control imposed paradoxically by the dogma of liberty and personality, the film director has to work with the chaste self-control of the vow.

The first part of his last trilogy, *Dogville* deals with this paradox in the parable of Grace. From *Dogme* to *Dogville*, the criticism directed to the Hollywood dogma of cinematic illusion and individuality, rather than just dissolve with the director's loyalty to the strict rules of the vow breached in both the film and its sequel, only grows metonymically into the fierce critique of the overarching American dogma of opportunity and bourgeois greediness. And on goes the trilogy *USA – Land of Opportunity*. The second part, *Manderlay* has at its centre again the eponymous prototypical 1930s American village. Manderlay's manna – from hell – is again Grace herself. But the actors are changed and the uniforms are exchanged, as Grace retries the American liberal dogma and the new villagers wear the European collective *Dogme*. The film starts several miles further away from the ending of *Dogville*, always on a defamiliarising map. On the road, a young black woman stops at the car of the gangsters to desperately implore the boss' daughter for help. Down in Manderlay it looks as though no one had noticed that slavery was abolished seventy years before. Grace is horrified at the sight of gorgeous Timothy waiting to be whipped. She has her gangsters keep in check the white tenants of the plantation of Manderlay and expresses her outrage in the face of the dying old mistress. In her death bed, she asks Grace to burn the book of 'Ma's Law' with the details to perpetuate the exploitation of the black workers. Only in the film's final denouement are we faced with the slaves'

complicity in their own submission. Grace's liberalism encounters the villagers' vowed Dogme discipline.

Grace's moral obligation pushes her to descend from her Father's car to save Manderlay. Ironically, the boss' warning that she ought not to mesh in local affairs lest it end up as with her little bird Tweety, died soon after being released by liberal Grace, only nourishes her determination to stay in Manderlay and train the freed slaves to survive in their new condition of liberty. But her dogmatic Hollywood individuality will inexorably yield to the Dogme disciplined collective. Her commitment to teach the principles of liberal democracy at Manderlay is ridiculed in the hilarious, yet bitter satire of liberal imperialism, with the quixotic pretension to teach how to be free. She teaches about opportunity and individual merit, but fails to distinguish one black villager from another; she wants to make good Americans out of the white exploiters by forcing them to serve at table with black-coloured faces; she preaches the importance of putting everything to democratic vote and cannot fix the clock of Manderlay at the correct time because of the time spent in voting what the exact time actually is. The film brilliantly continues and makes livelier and lighter with humour the parody of the American dogma of opportunity.

The critique of American liberalism saturates in Grace's failure. In the name of liberty, she has the trees in the 'old lady's garden' cut, which exposes Manderlay to a terrible dust storm. The damages result in famine, and the smallest baby of the community starves. The oldest woman of the plantation is found to be guilty of having surreptitiously eaten the baby's meals, and her sentence to death is sanctioned with a democratic vote. When finally the crisis is solved and the best

harvest is sold, the money collected is lost by gorgeous Timothy gambling thirsty of opportunity. After a night of passion with him, Grace is democratically elected as the new mistress in charge of enforcing again Ma's Law of slavery, and asked to whip Timothy as a punishment for the money lost. To her great disconcert, the black workers at Manderlay do not want to be free. They have always submitted willingly to their condition as slaves, with the ensuing possibilities. Got furious, Grace yields to their discipline and whips savagely Timothy. Like she had to impose on the Dogvilleans the discipline they deserved, she now has to put on Manderlay's uniform herself, this time without the intervention of her Father. As the black villagers witness, what looks as constraining can also be enabling. The Dogme metanarrative is again that the film director refuses the Hollywood liberal imperialism of awful genre movies and submits wholeheartedly to chaste abstinence from personal taste and aesthetic considerations.

Though breaching most rules of the vow, Lars von Trier's almost concluded last trilogy apparently bears intertextual relationship to Dogme 95's dissidence against Hollywood movies. Like the director with his distancing effects, the Father destroys the illusion of American opportunity in *Dogville*. His Child has to finally wear the uniform of collective discipline in *Manderlay*. It looks like the film trilogy is actually an ironic Trinity waiting for the Ghost city of *Washington*, the third part not yet released. The long codas of the first two films, with pictures of Americans living in miserable conditions, confirm that the trilogy is a relentless, yet playful anti-Americanist parody. But the Trinity also cherishes the precious Brechtian heritage of Dogme 95.

The villagers of *Dogville* and *Manderlay* reproduce metafactively the uniforms of the Hollywood dogma and the Scandinavian Dogme. Never would one indulge more ecstatically in European dogmatism than once presented with this irresistibly alluring cynical scenario of American opportunism. Both films deconstruct the age essentialism sanctioning the supremacy of the adult rational subject through ironic representations of autonomous and playful critique. While in *Dogville* the daughter gives up the ideal of becoming an independent adult, in *Manderlay* she gives up the ideal of educating others to be independent adults. Her autonomous and playful overcoming of age essentialism complements the puzzle of age ecstasy composed by the three films previously discussed, in that her metousiastic relativism expands on the estranged perspective presented by the German film.

### *Revealing Revelling in Shifting Shapes*

The two films by Lars von Trier lead back to the starting point of age essentialism and metousiastic ecstasy as crucial terms in relativism and identity. While the form of age essentialism associated with American liberalism claims the right to educate other subjects based on the assumption that the passage from childhood to adulthood implies revealing absolute epistemological and ethical certainties, the critique of this ideological complex entails revelling in relativity, as no position is universally valid and each stance has value only within a limited set of relations.

The two films experiment with estranging techniques that achieve an imagery of relativist ecstasy, where revelling wins over revealing.

The narrative of a sacrilegious trinity involving father, daughter and mafia is a caricature of the essentialism of children disciplined by adults. The daughter embraces only an ironic type of discipline, which amounts to revelling in estrangement from liberalist discipline and from its essentialist ideal of emancipation in (re)productive adulthood. The reflection on this narrative offers a fitting coda to this section.

This experimentation with estrangement explores the extremes of the aesthetics espoused by the German film previously observed, with its voice-over narration complementary to the narrative perspective adopted in the Italian film, where the metaphor of taxidermy as age essentialism provides a mirror image of the taxidermist imagery in the Hungarian film. In their distinctive and complementary styles, the relevant narratives converge in an exposure of adult discipline as illusory. This critique pervades the literary images of play and laughter, as discussed in relation to the German, Italian and Portuguese novels, and the Dutch poetical essay. The ecstasy of play and laughter is associated with childhood as a position to be strategically embraced so as to resist the essentialist ideology of adulthood, which suppresses the creative powers of being. Rather than revealing any linear development from childhood to adulthood, these narratives and metaphors converge in a circular rhetoric of playfulness and child-like fun. As health and adulthood are radically questioned in metousiastic relativism, Fatherly revelation can only give way to the grotesque laughter of critical, crazy, childish ecstasy.



#### IV. EROS AS A TROPE AND THE IDENTIFIER OF GENDER

Age and health essentialism are indissolubly bound to the heteronormative discourse sanctioning the moral and scientific value of heterosexual norms to regulate everyday social relationships.<sup>164</sup> The polarities of health and illness and of adulthood and childhood are associated with that of strong manhood and weak womanhood, where the tension between identity and otherness finds fertile ground. As soon as en-gendered, the Nietzschean ancient theatrical principle called Dionysian is clearly feminine, which is observed in Foucauldian terms by Mitchell Greenberg when discussing the overthrowing of paternal, monarchic and divine authority in classical theatre. This section discusses literary and cinematic narratives of subversive eroticism beyond the classification of masculinity and femininity, where normative male power is playfully and ironically overthrown and counter-normative feminine creativity is displayed. While emphasis is laid on the destruction of male norms in the novels *Das Parfum* and *V.M. 18*, the creativity of feminine critique triumphs in the films *Saturno contro* and *Vier Minuten*. Literary and audiovisual metousiastic relativism enshrines creative and critical eros, as opposed to gender norms.

---

<sup>164</sup> Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble*. New York and London, Routledge; Warner, M. (Ed.) (1993) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press; Seidman, S. (Ed.) (1996) *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers; Gamson J. (2000) Sexualities, queer theory, and qualitative research. In Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.

### *Sublime Androgyny*

This section shows how the novel *The Perfume* defies and overthrows social norms of masculinity. The literary art of Patrick Süskind is emblematic of European relativism. *Das Parfum* represents meta-artistically the relativist imaginative overcoming of imaginary essential forms. The central metaphor is that of the artificial perfume sublimating natural scent. The latter involves the inspiration of the transiency of being and the former hints at the intuition of the force of imagination and artificiality, upon which emphasis is laid from the title to the subtlest literary nuances.

The analysis of the novel starts from a discussion of the central metaphors of artificial perfume and natural scent. Successively, attention is paid to the intuition of the perfume as a relativist weapon for the imaginative protagonist to rise high above the indoctrinated characters and, in turn, to the revaluation of life and death in the novel. Although it would be tempting to expand on striking parallels with other works by the same author, this will not be pursued on this occasion, as doing so might steer attention away from this overly rich text within this uncommonly wide-ranging discussion of relativism in films and novels.

The story of the murderer Jean-Baptiste Grenouille unfolds in eighteenth century Paris, from his birth in the most stench-ridden market, through the lives silenced in his enterprise of making for himself an enchanting perfume, to his suicidal overdose of perfume which makes his worshippers literally eat him. Perceived by the sense ranked as the lowest one in the essentialist imaginary of the herd, scent represents in its multiplicity and elusiveness the occult force of the

transiency of the subjective forms of being. This inspiration shines through the constant and abundant descriptions of the realm of scent, as well as in the succession of the characters and in the death of the scent-overman.

Counterpointing the main theme of the imaginative force of the perfume, the inspiration of scent deserves closer attention.

The novel is based on the tension between scent and perfume. Scent represents the transiency of being, where all entities are characterized by their unique combination of scents, and are doomed to pass away with the recombination of scent in ever different patterns characterizing other irreducibly unique forms of subjects. The awareness of transiency offers the creative inspiration distinguishing exceptional subjects such as the novel's protagonist, whose status as 'Genie' and 'Scheusal' in relation to the 'flüchtige Reich der Gerüche' [the fleeting realm of scent] is emphasised from the first page (5). Scent's characterization as elusive suggests the metaphor of scent as the elusiveness of existence, with the adjective *flüchtig*'s phonetic and semantic associations and partial rhymes with not only *Flucht*, but also *Flug*, that is, flight, and *Willkür*, that is, arbitrary will, which is etymologically related to the corresponding terms in Latin and Greek, as well as to the Sanskrit *bala*, that is, force. Although some may well disagree on this and any other etymological readings, the discourse analysis adopted in this enquiry allows room for speculation as a helpful component of the interpretative process, along with stricter historical discussion. As represented in the image of scent, existence is irreducible to a static essence, as it is actually a dynamic force.

The extraordinary inspiration of transience is represented in Grenouille's hypersensitivity to smell, and more subtly also in his personal *scentlessness*. The power to recognize being as an ever-changing combination of scents in always unique combinations finds metaphorical representation in the scentless position, from which it is possible to perceive the transiency of being. The inspiration of scent as elusive leads to the intuition of the artificial and imaginary character of all essentialist conceptions of being, which the novel represents in the images of the *absolute essences* at the top of the hierarchies of scent used to produce perfumes. With the intuition of the beauty and goodness of perfume's hierarchies of scent as an imaginary abstraction based on convention, corresponding to the protagonist's discovery of his scentless position, Grenouille deploys the critical and creative power of imagination to reach the sublime unity of a perfume which exceeds all other perfumes.

In the protagonist's development, he criticizes all the ideological discourses embodied by the other characters, and creates his own unique perfume combining the scents of his victims. Grenouille's murderous story is a metaphor for the sublime unity between *Wesen* and *Verwesung*, or essential being and decaying being, essence and decadence, life and death. As a meta-fictive representation of the act of writing literature and any other creative act, the art and craft of perfumery represents the deployment of critical and creative imagination to overcome all conventional distinctions of good and evil. Eventually, as soon as Grenouille's sublime perfume is loved and, thereby, loses its sublime unity to become again a partial image of beauty and goodness, the artist turns to the ultimate act of self-overcoming by channelling his worshippers' love into his own

ritual suicide. Love and hatred, life and death, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, all conventional distinctions collapse in Grenouille's perfume's overcoming of scent.

Scent corresponds to identity (34). The subject is represented as a unique combination of scents doomed to disappear without trace, *spurlos* (5). Being is revealed as meta-essential, or metousiastic, that is, as constituted beyond any ideal of absolute essences in the ephemeral assemblage of decaying scents, perceived by the sense organ regarded as the most 'primitiv' and 'niedrig' [low] (20) from the essentialist perspective of organized society culminated in modernity, where the abundance of smells characterizing Grenouille's pre-revolutionary environment is repressed to serve the ideologies of hygiene, public health, and common good. Far from corresponding to the ideal of essence sanctioned in ideology, identity is elusive and transient as in the unpredictable juxtapositions of scents.

The exceptional subject, Grenouille, is hypersensitive precisely to scent, whose ineffability reveals the insufficiency of linguistic conventions to capture the elusive complexity of identity. The extraordinary awareness of the elusiveness of existence is represented in Grenouille's scentless position, as he 'riecht überhaupt nicht' (14) [does not smell at all] and possesses 'nicht einmal einen eigenen Duft' (20) [not even an odour of his own]. The monstrous genius' position as a subject without scent, that is, without identity, is a metaphor for his hypersensitivity to the elusiveness of existence, accompanied by the insensitivity to the essentialist ideologies governing social and subjective organization. From

the scentless position of metousiastic relativism it is possible to overcome the elusiveness represented by scent in the critical creation represented by perfume.

As suggested by the title and the subtitle with the association of perfume to murder, the critical and creative overcoming of the elusiveness of existence is a sublime undertaking, posited in the metousiastic dimension beyond the distinctions deriving from the dichotomy of good and evil. Belonging to the category of 'Finstermänner' [sinister men], Grenouille is characterized by 'Selbstüberhebung, Menschenverachtung, Immoralität, kurz ... Gottlosigkeit' [pride, misanthropy, immorality; in brief, impious godlessness] from the first page (5). The scent overman is fiendishly clever, 'gierig' [greedy] (9) and 'unheimlich' [uncanny] (30) in relation to his extraordinary 'Phantasie' (34), which allows him to imagine scent combinations never-experienced, that is, to create reality, being, identity. Grenouille engages in the creative self-overcoming possible in the critique of conventional distinctions of scent, that is, of identity, with a tragic hubris challenging all ideals of morality and metaphysical order.

Monstrous schizophrenia is glorified also in the novel *Ventajas de viajar en tren* [Advantages of a Train Journey] (2000) by Antonio Orejudo Utrilla. The text revolves around a schizophrenic patient, Martin, who meets on a train a woman writer, Helga. No synopsis can give a linear account of the plot, which is meant as a postmodern play where several contradictory subplots clash in a schizophrenic display of identity as fluid, which is a key to the title's metaphor of the train journey as a deceptively linear movement towards a destination that unpredictable meetings can easily turn upside down. Martin and Helga meet on a train and show readers that experience and existence do not have a universal and

eternal meaning. Actually, relentless storytelling shapes ever different meanings as in a schizophrenic stream where nothing stays the same. This is shown in an embrace of mental disorder and disgust, as the novel centres on Martin's obsessive worship of stench and excrements, even as food to eat.

This pathological state yields unexpected insights:

la verdadera esencia del hombre está en la mierda, en esa materia despreciable que creemos bajar por una tubería anónima y sumergirse con un ruido líquido en las aguas fecales de las alcantarillas. [...] no nos importa suministrar despreocupadamente y con alivio cuando nos creemos a salvo de cualquier mirada y nos sentamos en nuestra íntima taza del váter los aspectos más ocultos de nuestra personalidad, de nuestros gustos y nuestro temperamento, de nuestros ciclos y nuestras crisis.

the true essence of man lies in shit, in this shameful matter which we believe we can flush away down a nameless pipe to sink with a liquid noise in the faecal waters of sewers. When we think to be safe from any gaze and sit down on our intimate toilet bowl, we don't mind exposing carelessly and with relief the most hidden features of our character, tastes and temperament, of our cycles and crises.

Helga gains these insights from her meeting with Martin. Society despises through disgust every threat posed by unstable change, which is suggested by excrements that both infect bodies and supply fertilizing nourishment for the earth and new

trees and other forms of life replacing older ones. The private and hidden routine of shameful discharge becomes a symbol of cycle, crisis, and change.

This novel clearly takes on board Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's schizophrenic model of postmodern deterritorialisation, or estrangement. In fact, this story estranges readers through an ironic glorification of stench and disease, so as to show that all attempts to fix a stable essence are vain authoritarian strains, which are outrun by the relentless stream of ever different shapes of meaning and experience.

In the German novel, the monstrous genius absorbs voraciously all scents and all conventional hierarchical distinctions, until the discovery of the scent which constitutes the 'Ende aller Gerüche' [end of all scents] (47) and the principium individuationis of organized society's essentialist hierarchies, which lies in the body of a girl at puberty. All conventional distinctions associated with the dichotomy of good and evil are reduced to the essence of heteronormative reproductive sexuality as the ultimate foundation of organized life. The image of the red-haired maiden with tree fruits alludes to Eve in the Judaeo-Christian myth of origins, where humanity's loss of innocence is determined by the sinful woman who mothers the generations of mortal sinners needing social organization to enforce God's laws. The modern scientific and technological proceedings of perfumery, associated with alchemy and magic, rely on conventional hierarchies based upon the supreme scent of heavenly bliss and innocence not-yet-lost, hinting at the continuity between the religious and the modern essentialist conceptions, of which the former sets the ultimate essence as God's spiritual dimension, and the latter continues the myth of linear progress with the ideal of



material beauty, health and wealth. The overmanly, that is, hyperhuman, perfumer criticizes the ideologies deriving from the essential principle of virginal scent by engaging in the creation of a sublime perfume which achieves the essence of innocence in the ultimate moral decay of serial murders.

Grenouille identifies the religious essence of conventional hierarchies and distinctions in the virgin scent, and then embarks on the training in the art and craft, the science and the technology of perfumery, based on 'Essences absolues' (60) distinguished by specific 'Namen' (96). Names actually amount to mere conventionalized illusions. Absolute essences are mere abstractions. The 'Überzeugungskraft des Duftes' [the scent's power of persuasion] (107) is stronger than names, as the transiency of being captured in Grenouille's creations cannot be encompassed or comprehended in the conventions of society, science, and technology. The genius' exceptional position of overmanly awareness bears with it the mission of sublimation, as his discovery that he 'konnte sich nicht riechen' [could not smell himself] (161), indicating metaphorically his extraordinary condition, leads to the intuition of the self-overcoming power of critical self-creation, that is, of creating his own sublime perfume beyond the conventions of traditional morality, modern science, and organized society.

The outsider can create reality by criticizing it as constituted by the 'Grundthema' [foundation theme] of organization and the 'Aura' of subjectivity (191). Scent represents the elusiveness of reality, whose skeleton is the 'Grundthema' of organization which enables adaptation to the environment and amounts to ideological indoctrination, as people are not aware of the power of scent. Reality is articulated in the ideological structure of organization with

distinctive subjects characterized by a unique 'Aura', that is, the unique combination of scents representing the distinguishing intersections of differences and interests of every individual subject. Grenouille's position of awareness of organization and subjectivity is characterized as scentless, metaphorically hinting at his critical power in relation to the 'Grundthema' of organization and at his creative force to generate his own 'Aura' of subjectivity.

The murderous perfumer's will is to be:

der omnipotente Gott des Duftes ... , so wie er es in seinen Phantasien gewesen war, aber nun in der wirklichen Welt und über wirkliche Menschen. Und er wusste, dass dies in seiner Macht stand. Denn die Menschen konnten die Augen zumachen vor der Größe, vor dem Schrecklichen, vor der Schönheit und die Ohren verschließen vor Melodien oder betörenden Worten. Aber sie konnten nicht dem Duft entziehen. Denn der Duft war ein Bruder des Atems. Mit ihm ging er in die Menschen ein, sie konnten sich seiner nicht erwehren, wenn sie leben wollten. Und mitten in sie hinein ging der Duft, direkt ans Herz, und unterschied dort kategorisch über Zuneigung und Verachtung, Ekel und Lust, Liebe und Hass. Wer die Gerüche beherrschte, der beherrschte die Herzen der Menschen.<sup>165</sup> (198-199)

---

<sup>165</sup> 'The Almighty God of scent, as was was the case in his fantasies, yet now also in the real world and with real people. And he knew that he owned this power. For people could shut their eyes to height and dread and beauty, and shut their ears to melodies, or even to beguiling words. Yet, they could not escape scent. For scent was akin to breathing. With every breath, scent got into people; they could not get rid of it, if they wished to live. And right into them did scent go, straight to the heart, and conjured categorical distinctions in there between fondness and loathing, sickness and longing, love and hate. He who mastered smells, mastered people's hearts.'

Associated with breath, scent is the vital force which manifests itself as subjectivity and organization. The image involves a revaluation of divinity where the power of respiratory recurrence is held by the all-mighty perfumer, that is, the artist who critically and creatively overcomes subjectivity and organization. The very centrality of scent represents the questioning of the essentialist hierarchy of senses and values, which sanctions the superiority of sight and hearing over touch, taste, and smell. Imagination can become reality in the scentless perfumer's sublimation, thanks exactly to the scentless awareness of reality's ultimately imaginary character. Only scent illusions create all the valuations defining reality in the chiasmic dichotomous terms derived from the fallacious distinction of essence and decadence, sanctioned in subjectivity and organization. The murderous perfume sublimates reality by virtue of the perfumer's scentless awareness of the elusiveness of being, which culminates in his suicide as soon as the sublime perfume is revealed as yet another dream.

'Wonne und Schrecken' (215), that is, bliss and horror constitute the coincidence of opposites whence Grenouille's artistic intuition springs, when he recognises in his last victim the recurrence of his first victim's virginal scent. His 'Liebe' (242), that is, the overman's *amor fati*, is beyond the partial convention of love as opposed to hatred. Grenouille loves the eternal recurrence of being, both in the creation of his perfume and in the murders necessary to realize his masterpiece. His sublime love embraces the horror of being as 'flüchtig' [fleeting] (243), that is, as elusive. His scentless, that is, sublime awareness that every possession goes hand in hand with some kind of loss allows him to go for 'Besitz

*und Verlust* [possession *and* loss] (244, emphasis in the original), with the willingness to lose again all of his perfume's metaphorical gain.

The genial perfumer is after 'Einheit' [unity] in scent (52), in so far as he aspires to the overcoming of conventional opposites onto a superior unity. 'Sublim' (111) are his creations, as they exceed the quality of conventional perfumes. While conventional perfumes are based on the use of absolute essences, Grenouille's attention is captured by the dynamic 'Verfahren' [process] (125) whereby he can create his perfumes based on his hypersensitivity to all scents, beyond the few ones for which perfumery provides names and absolute essences. His perfumes are divine, as they can disclose a virtual 'Garten Eden' (127), by virtue of their sublime, overmanly overcoming of conventions. He is also called a 'Märtyrer' (130), as a consequence of his selfless experimenting activity in perfumery.

In his fantastic laboratory of scents he is like God in the Genesis, seeing that everything is good (161), as his imagination offers the possibility to achieve a revaluation beyond conventional distinctions of good and evil. The phrase 'Also sprach' [Thus Spoke] (163) equals him to the Persian, and Nietzschean, prophet Zarathustra, as well. His perfume is 'übermenschlich' [overmanly] (198), as his hubris is accompanied by the awareness that 'Gott' [God] is a 'Betrüger' [impostor] (200). The essentialist orders of religion and science posit the absolute distinction between decadence and essence, whereas the overmanly perfumer senses the inextricable bond between the 'Welken' [solving] and the 'Absorption' [coagulation] (222) of being, which he realizes in his murderous masterpiece.

He creates for himself a 'Duftkleid' [scent dress] (231) by means of his critical 'Jagd' [hunt] (235), whose victims are those who essentially inspire conventional 'Liebe' [love] (240), that is, virgins ripe to serve the herd as mothers and housekeepers. His perfume is a 'Duftdiadem' [scent diadem] (246) where:

(w)enn man sich ... all die Opfer nicht mehr als einzelne Individuen, sondern als Teile eines höheren Prinzips vorstellte und sich in idealistischer Weise ihre jeweiligen Eigenschaften als zu einem einheitlichen Ganzen verschmolzen dächte, dann müsste das aus solchen Mosaiksteinen zusammengesetztes Bild das Bild der Schönheit schlechthin sein, und der Zauber, der von ihm ausginge, wäre nicht mehr von menschlicher, sondern von göttlicher Art (258).

The overman is associated with Christ with a 'Holzkreuz' [wooden cross] (291), and then to 'Allah' (301) and, further, to 'Herrgott' [the Lord] in a 'Bacchanal', as well as to 'Prometheus' (304), wearing his 'Duftmasker' [scent mask] (306) revealing 'Liebe' [love] (316) as merely a murderous illusion. The intersections between different religious images from eastern and western traditions and those between Grenouille's low social class, asexuality, premature genius, deviancy, and physical disability, along with his offering his body as food for the poor and the criminals of Paris in the end, converge in a relativist revaluation of Christ which, while criticising Christian morality, stresses Christ's and all other religions' prophets' openness to the abject of organized society. The metaphor of the sublimation of murdered virgins' scents unto an all-mighty perfume

overcomes the essentialist dichotomies derived from the absolute distinction of good and evil.

The critical perfumer's story is constellated with the falling stars of utterly ideologically indoctrinated characters, whose existence is marked by the organized essentialism of the social herd. Their absolute values, their identities *alias* scents, are ordered in the hierarchy deriving from the essence of the herd's safety and survival, from the Christian ethos of the redemption from the original sin to the modern norms of bourgeois mediocrity. Grenouille's mother is a fish-seller who aspires to become an 'ehrenwerte Frau' [honourable woman] (8), meanwhile killing her babies at birth. Her last newborn's hypersensitivity to the surrounding smells makes him cry so hard that the passers-by discover the degenerate mother's plan of infanticide and, eventually, save the baby. 'Unsicherheit und Unruhe' [unsafety and unrest] (19) are the enemies of such mediocre subjects, as the monk who is so frightened by the baby's evil nose that he takes the little devil to the farthest children's house from his parish. Honour (*Ehre*) and security/safety (*Sicherheit*) within society are the absolute values blinding the novel's characters.

'Emotionslosigkeit ... Ordnungs- und Gerechtigkeitssinn' [self-control, the sense of order and justice] (26) follow from the bureaucratic organization of life in the herd, which is represented in the money-focused governess of the children's house. What is central in the herd's ideological organization is the dichotomy of 'Erfindung' [discovery] and 'Regel' [rule] (67), from whose perspective Grenouille's master perfumer perceives the young genius as 'in seiner zügellosen Kreativität eine Gefahr' [a danger in his unbridled creativity] (69). The

bureaucratic repression of creativity in favour of secure absolute rules linking religious to modern ideology is enforced in the ageist imposition of ‘Zunft’ [discipline] (100), ‘heiligen Ernst ... kalten Ernst ... handwerkliche Nüchternheit, ... trocknen Geschäftssinn’ [sacred seriousness, cold seriousness, craftsmanly soberness, the dry sense of business] (89), along with ‘Ausdauer’ [perseverance], ‘Fleiß’ [diligence], ‘Erfahrung’ [experience/tradition], and ‘Bescheidenheit’ [humbleness] (97), following the principles of ‘Arbeitsteilung’ [work division], ‘Rationalisierung’ [rationalization] (115), and ‘Formelsammlung’ [piling-up of formulas] (119). The scents of so many illusions crowd Grenouille’s vast olfactory field.

The noble scientist who virtually, and deceptively, saves him from his fantastic isolation back into society is the author of the scientific theory of ‘Vitalkraft’ [vital force] (179), which condenses ideology’s conventional hierarchies by describing reality in the vertical movement of vital force from the lower to the higher. What guides the mediocre in the imaginary ascent of life is ‘Geschäftssinn’ [business focus] aimed at ‘Wohlstand’ [wealth] (220), as with the owners of Grenouille’s perfumer’s house in Grasse. His murders revalue the verticality of morality by creating the highest perfume in the lowest crimes. The incidents are immediately attributed to the social outcasts by the community, as the ethnically discriminated ‘Zigeuner’ [gypsies] (247) are the first suspects. The abject who do not pursue the vital ascent to wealth are associated with the moral decay of the series of crimes.

Grenouille’s ‘Schlussstein’ [closing stone] (261) in his perfume’s diadem is a maiden who epitomizes the herd-like ideals of honour and safety, as her

‘Heirat’ [marriage] (253) is pre-arranged by her father’s ‘Verstand’ [rationality] (260), which succumbs to the general ‘Hilflosigkeit’ [desperation/helplessness] (282) when she is murdered in spite of his protection. The citizens await Grenouille’s execution as a ‘Fest’ [feast] (293), where their herd-like ‘Ekstase’ (303) is captured by his finished perfume, which convinces them of his divine innocence. The ‘Fall G.’ [Case G.] (313) is closed by blaming someone else, and the community’s life is ‘normalisiert’ [normalized] (314) in the reaffirmation of ideology's illusions.

Grenouille criticises ideology with his scent creativity since his ‘schreien’ (9) and the movement of his ‘Nase’ [nose] (22) as a baby. He is a ‘Zeck’ [bug] (27) fed by his creative criticism ‘*gegen die Liebe und dennoch für das Leben*’ [against love and, yet, for life] (28), that is, against the conventions of organized society and for the irreducible complexity of being as captured in the metaphor of scent. His artistic sublimation is the culmination of his ‘immerwehendes Überwintern’ [ever-grieving survival] (29), ‘abseits’ [set apart] (31) from the norms of morality. He respects the work ethics to which he is exposed only to counter and, eventually, revalue it with his aesthetic murders:

Von einem Tag zum andern verkapselte er wieder die ganze Energie seines Trotzes und seiner Widerborstigkeit in sich selbst, verwendete sie allein dazu, auf zeckenhafte Manier die Epoche der bevorstehenden Eiszeit zu überdauern: zäh, genügsam, unauffällig, das Licht der Lebenshoffnung auf kleinster, aber wohlbehüteter Flamme haltend. (41)



Grenouille channels his apparent obedience to social norms into the satisfaction of his critical and creative ‘Jagdlust’ [lust for hunting] (43). While he starts his undertaking by absorbing all kinds of scents according to ‘kein Prinzip’ [no principle] (48) whatsoever, his strategic respect for social norms guides him straight to the main scent ‘Einheit’ [unity] (52) representing the essence of ideology, that is, the virginal scent of heteronormative reproductive honour and security for the mediocre survival of the species.

As soon as his master perfumer sees him ‘herumpanschen? Mit Essenzen ...’ [mess up? With essences] (99), he defines Grenouille as a ‘Kind’ [child] (105), that is, as a subject who is not yet indoctrinated in the ideology of organized society. The genial monster needs to wear the ‘Mantel einer bürgerlichen Existenz’ [cloak of an ordinary existence] (121), accepting the master’s ‘Bedingungen’ [conditions] (139), in order to deploy his critical and creative power. His perseverance overcomes the scientific laws according to which the ‘Doktor’ (133) diagnoses his inevitably quick death. Actually, the genial perfumer eludes all moral and scientific conventions, and nourishes an innate ‘Reserviertheit’ [reservations] (148) against the ‘Menschen’ [people] (149) around him, which he unleashes in his isolation in the period of hermit-like ‘Einsamkeit in der Gruft’ [solitude in the cave] (157), where he ‘badete in seiner eigenen, durch nichts mehr abgelenkten Existenz’ [bathed in his own existence, at long last steered away by nothing] (158). The conventional mask which enables him to intervene in society is actually a derivation of the normative regime which disables him as an abject in the mediocre herd. Both before and after his fantastic isolation, the creative critic is:

ein Meister in der Kunst, Langeweile zu verbreiten und sich als unbeholfenen Trottel zu geben – freilich nie so übertrieben, dass man sich mit Genuss über ihn lustig machen oder ihn als Opfer für irgendeinen der derben Zunftspäße gebrauchen hätte können. Es gelang ihm, als vollständig uninteressant zu gelten. Man ließ ihn in Ruhe. Und nichts anderes wollte er. (231)

The creative critic uses ideology to eventually revalue it and, ultimately, to overcome it in his artistic sublimation.

The perfumer's creative criticism disseminates one success after the other. His mother is beheaded (9), the governess of his children's house loses the money needed to prevent her corpse from common burial at her death (40), his master dies when an earthquake destroys the bridge on which his house and shop are located (144), his noble saviour disappears in a snow storm while trying to reach the highest, and therefore most vital, point of a mountain (207), and his virgin victims are all murdered. All these deaths represent the revelation of social conventions as actually life-weakening. The final creation of the perfume is a metaphor for the life-empowering character of critical creativity, beyond the conventional distinctions of life and death, good and evil.

*The Cyclical Order of Eros*

The deconstruction of gender norms examined in the previous section is taken further in this section about a more recent Italian novel. A trilogy on resentment and morality started with *V.M. 18* by dandy – that is, simply loving of bohemian and subversive styles – woman writer Isabella Santacroce, whose protagonist and narrator is the fatally seductive teenage girl Desdemona in a religious college where she designs lugubrious adventures of sex and humiliation to death with her two irresistibly alluring roommates. Desdemona's memories revolve around her explosive sexual yearnings, which transcend her repressive education.<sup>166</sup> The relationship established between orgasm and mystical ecstasy characterizes the little seducer as a priestess of impurity. Her body is a blasphemous altar to worship the pleasures abhorred as sinful by traditional morality.

As an attribute, the condition of childhood connotes a low social status, as the word *child* often denotes unmarried or childless adults.<sup>167</sup> This sense of inferiority is marked by the foreclosure of sexuality to children, which is conjured up by the Italian acronym serving as the novel's title, 'age restricted'. The oxymoronic character of adolescent sexuality is powerfully enhanced by the stark contrast between the novel's prohibitive title and its deliberately licentious content, with clear intertextual bonds to the outrageously obscene works written by the Marquis de Sade. The contrast between the characters' status as adolescents and their dissolute behaviour is crucial to Santacroce's hyperbolic critique of morality along the lines traced by Nietzsche.

---

<sup>166</sup> p. 13.

<sup>167</sup> Gillis, John, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1790–Present*. London: Academic Press (1981), p. 1.

The opposition between moralist education and devilish pleasure is central also in the memories of one of Desdemona's roommates and accomplices.<sup>168</sup> The narrative enclosed in this passage plays on the tension between the purity of the nursemaid's son and the impurity of the little girl, who takes pleasure in insulting the boy. She is associated with anal rape and vicious pleasure, filth, hell, and wild instincts, while the imagery surrounding the nursemaid encompasses indolence, milk, and a carol's silent Christmas night complete with lit trees and sweet smells. Virtue is made of necessity, as anal rape meant to degrade comes to spark the girl's rebellious libido.

Blasphemous imagery hints at the three girls' rebellion against morality in the college where they meet:

Gesù Cristo Sofferto, la cui pallida carne scolpita nell'alabastro  
luccicava benevolmente se a contatto con l'ombra, si contorceva  
toccandosi il sesso, e quando mi alzavo per genuflettere il corpo,  
scorgevo la parete divisoria del bagno, abbellita dal cerchio di seta  
dall'azzurro tremendo, nel quale salivano a volo dei serafini  
d'argento, gonfiarsi come un ventre di donna prossima al parto.<sup>169</sup>

The crucifix is represented as a sensual body yearning for pleasure against the wall where it hangs. As the wall looks as though it were a pregnant womb, this fantastic vision of Christ also alludes to the unaware fertility of his semen while he is merely seeking the satisfaction of his lustful senses. The novel does not limit

---

<sup>168</sup> Pp. 41-42.

<sup>169</sup> 'Jesus Christ Sufferer, whose pale flesh sculpted in alabaster shined benignly if touched by shades, tossed and turned to touch his genitals, and, as I raised to kneel with all my body, I could see in the distance the bathroom's wall – embellished by a silky circle of tremendous blue, where silvery seraphs rose up in flight – swelling like the belly of a woman close to giving birth.' Pp. 103-4.

itself to spiritualizing sex. Religious symbols are also sexualized and worshipped as in a cult of the erotic body.

The sacrilegious logic at play finds eloquent elaboration:

Contro l'austerità di vergognose regole imposte, s'ergeva il nostro imponente disdegno, dove l'abuso della voluttà diveniva benevolmente sacrilego, e dove con furia desideravamo insudiciare gli insegnamenti impartiti dalla famiglia, vile covo di codardia e di goffaggine, membro castratore e dispensatore d'insormontabili tedi, per poi dilaniare qualsiasi assennato principio incontrato all'interno del Collegio delle Fanciulle: le sue proibizioni continue, l'esigere umiltà e rispetto, quell'accanirsi nel voler glorificare la pace dei sensi come unica strada conducente alla gioia terrestre, quel volerci innocue fanciulle addobbate di fiocchi.

Principiavamo a chiarire alcuni concetti [...]: possedevamo un semplice abbozzo d'intenti, impregnati di manifesti delitti, dove Satana, vestito solo di oreficerie e di diamantine schegge, duellava con Dio Onnipotente dal capo cinto da una corona superba di carbonchi e coralli, e non v'era astio in quel loro battagliaarsi torcendo le reni, gridando per spaurire il rivale davanti, che ne imitava la foga nell'emettere versi intimanti il proseguo di quel focoso conflitto, bensì una pura esibizione di divina bellezza, un misurare le rispettive potenze senza risparmio di sforzi, offrendo lo

spettacolare possesso di virilità indistruttibili e magiche, nello  
scintillio dei loro bardati corpi.

[...] Ero un satanico Dio, un celestiale demonio, ero la somma di  
due sacralità contrapposte e identiche [...]. Questo io mi sentivo:  
l'Eroina dell'Estasi.<sup>170</sup>

Family is portrayed as a shelter for weakness and inhibition. Its patriarchal order is echoed in the image of a phallus in erection to which the activity of castration is paradoxically attributed. On the one hand, patriarchy relies on the fear of castration on the part of children and women. On the other hand, the implicit counter-phallus of imagination held by children and women is systematically inhibited by the castrating deterrence enforced by patriarchs. Repressive education perpetuates patriarchal inhibitions through its rules intended to restrict and contain pride by imposing humility. The three rebellious maidens design a revolt against the simple binary oppositions upheld by family and college alike. Unlike the simple distinctions of good and evil passed on by repressive education, the three girls envisage a critique where both opposing principles are entwined together.

---

<sup>170</sup> 'Against the austerity of shameful authoritarian rules rose up our majestic disdain, where the abuse of sultriness became benignly sacrilegious, and where we furiously craved to soil the teachings dispensed by family, vile lair of cowardice and clumsiness, castrating virile member and dispenser of insurmountable boredoms, and then tear off any sensible principle encountered in the College of the Maidens: its ceaseless prohibitions, its demands of humility and respect, such obstinacy in the glorification of the peace of the senses as the one and only way leading to earthly joy, that wish to have us as dressed up maidens.

We began to clarify some concepts: we owned a simple draft of intents, imbued with clear crimes, where Satan, wearing only jewels and diamond splinters, waged a duel against God Almighty with on his head a superb crown of carbuncles and corals, and there was no grudge in their bowel-twisting fight – with screams and shouts meant to scare off each other, so each would then mock the other's rage with yet more such sounds whereby they spurred each other to keep fighting that fiery war – but there was rather a full show of godly gorgeousness, a way of testing each other's might without saving sweats, with the awesome outpouring of their unbreakable and magical male strengths through the glow of their shelled bodies.

I was a satanic God, a heavenly demon; I was the sum of two holinesses counterpoised and identical. This I felt to be: the Heroine of Ecstasy.' Pp. 107-8.

This critical force is far from metaphysical, as it pervades the girls' bodies. God and Satan are depicted in an eternal fight where they symbolize the perpetual cycle of production and destruction wherein experience unravels. Rather than dwelling somewhere remote from experience, these forces are one and the same principle residing within material bodies, of whose ecstasy Desdemona feels to be the heroine.

This imagery of entwinement and immanence recurs in the novel's last sentences:

Nella volta celeste che la luna glorificava con la sua affascinante comparsa, io vidi me stessa divenir infinita riempiendo dell'aria lo spazio, e assumere una crocifissa postura, che Gesù Sofferto con orgoglio osservava, ripetendo con lirico suono dal divino esaltato le parole seguenti: "Tu sei un satanico Dio, un celestiale demonio, tu sei la somma di due sacralità contrapposte e identiche, tu sei ora per sempre nei secoli dei secoli l'Eroina dell'Estasi".<sup>171</sup> 491

Ecstasy and pride counter the strict humility preached in repressive education.

Desdemona embraces her demoniac and divine force. The liturgical formula 'nunc et semper in saecula saeculorum' furnishes a fitting closure to this little masterpiece of critical sacrilege.

---

<sup>171</sup> 'In the vault of heaven glorified by the moon with her fascinating appearance, I saw myself becoming infinite and filling air space, and posing as a crucifix, which Jesus Sufferer proudly observed, while repeating with a lyrical sound exalted by the divine the following words: "You are a satanic God, a heavenly demon; you are the sum of two holinesses counterpoised and identical; you are both now and always, unto the ages of ages, the Heroine of Ecstasy.' P. 491.

*Le Voyage d'hiver* by dandy writer Amélie Nothomb revolves around three characters whose bodies range from invisible normalcy to blatant grotesqueness, with a middle position of unsettling ambiguity. The narrator, Zoïle, enjoys the invisibly normal position of a conventional male subject desperately trying to seduce Astrolabe, the mysterious and charming assistant of his favourite writer, Aliénor Malèze, who is a spectacularly disabled woman. As soon as Astrolabe's grotesquely cold body is finally unveiled in all its asexual pride thanks to her loss of inhibitions during a trip of hallucinogen mushrooms, Zoïle's resentful indignation determines him to make a plane crash on the Tour Eiffel, whose shape represents the letter A, that is, the initial of both the object of his deranged desire and his rival in receiving her attention. The grotesque body of Astrolabe is a site of unsettling ambiguity, where Nothomb's oxymoronic aesthetics beyond beauty and ugly is deployed (David, p. 196). The letter A is the initial of the author, too, as she explains in a TV interview that she once met, herself, someone with the reductionist prejudices criticized in the novel. Ambiguity is a central theme in the carnivalesque unfolding of the narration.

Zoïle is dismayed when he first meets the autistic writer and her gorgeous assistant:

Les deux filles portaient une quinzaine de pulls de laine recouverts d'autant de manteaux, écharpes et bonnets. L'anormale avait l'air d'une version demeurée du yéti. La jolie conservait dans cette tenue une allure gracieuse. L'espace d'un instant, je me demandai si elles formaient un couple. Comme pour répondre à ma question,



la créature se mit à faire des bulles avec sa salive. Non, elles ne pouvaient pas être ensemble. J'en ressentis du soulagement.<sup>172</sup>

The sensation of cold associated with the eponymous season pervades the bodies of both women. Yet, the male subject judges them based on conventional norms of corporeality, and concludes that the two women are diametrically different from each other. Though estranged at first, he reduces all of his perceptions to his familiar normative schemes of understanding, and tries to seduce Astrolabe.

During the eponymous trip, her alleged normality is radically complicated:

Je parviens à la déshabiller, incrédule, il est si facile de découvrir la beauté, il suffit de lui enlever les vêtements, hélas, presque aussitôt m'est révélé le problème, Astrolabe est constituée de pierre, sans métaphore, il fallait me dire que tu étais une statue, elle se regarde, se touche, que m'est-il arrivé, d'habitude je n'ai pas ce corps, suis-je ainsi partout, oui, tu es de la pierre partout, elle rit, moi je ne trouve pas ça drôle, elle me demande si j'ai déjà fait l'amour sous champignons, non, mais j'ai des amis qui ont été capables, ce doit être possible, elle me demande si c'est ça être stone, j'imagine que oui, il est terrible d'apprendre en de telles circonstances la réalité d'une expression, je la caresse dans l'espoir de lui rendre son corps

---

<sup>172</sup> 'The two women were wearing more than a dozen woollen sweaters covered with just as many coats, scarves and hats. The abnormal one looked like a retarded version of the yeti. The pretty one kept a graceful flair even in that outfit. For a moment I wondered whether they were a couple. As though to answer my question, the creature started to make bubbles with her saliva. No, they could not possibly be in a relationship. About that I felt somewhat relieved.' 34

de chair, Astrolabe n'en durcit que davantage, est-il pensable d'être dure à ce point, elle se donne des coups de poing sur le ventre, avec sidération, elle me dit qu'elle ne sent rien, sauf une douleur au poing, je suis une statue de glace, conclut-elle.<sup>173</sup>

The glacial sensation pervading the first encounter haunts the man again, as soon as he faces Astrolabe's sinister body. His plan to have sex with her under the effect of hallucinogen mushrooms is hampered by the discovery of her physical ambiguity. Again, he immediately tries to make her fit in his normative schemes, for once believing that her frigidity is due to the drugs.

Her sinister laughter alienates him again:

Son rire me consterne, je comprends qu'elle n'a pas de peine, peut-être même y trouve-t-elle son compte, je suis seul dans ma frustration, si elle m'aime, elle m'aime comme aiment les statues de glace, je contemple sa beauté inaccessible, si la mort a raison de

---

<sup>173</sup> 'I succeed in undressing her, in disbelief, it is so easy to uncover beauty, it suffices to take off its clothes, unfortunately, nearly as fast the problem is unveiled to me, Astrolabe is made up of stone, not a metaphor, you should have told me you were a statue, she looks at herself, she touches herself, what happened to me, I don't usually have this body, am I really like this, yes, you are like stone everywhere, she laughs, but I don't find this funny, she asks me if I already made love under the effect of mushrooms, I haven't, but I have some friends who could, it must be possible, she asks me if this is being stoned, I guess so, it is dreadful to learn in such circumstances how real a way of saying can be, I caress her hoping to give her back her body of flesh, Astrolabe only hardens even more, is it thinkable to be as hard as that, she hits her belly with her fist, petrified, she tells me she can't feel anything, except for a pain in her fist, I am a statue of ice, she concludes.' 104-05

nous, si nous lui cédon, c'est parce qu'elle est belle et qu'il est impossible de lui faire l'amour.<sup>174</sup>

In the end, the male subject realizes that Astrolabe's body is ambiguous in a way that overcomes his simplistic distinctions of beauty and ugly, life and death. Her glacial body is marked by a sinister hybridity, where her beauty is associated with death due to its transcendence of normative sexuality. Defeated, the male subject can only kill himself and others in the final desperate terrorist act, which hints at the inextricable entwinement of normative deterrence and terror.

### *Creative sublimation*

This section builds on the undoing of gender observed above by looking at a selection of films. Migration and changes in gender roles influence the dynamic redefinition of early twenty-first century European identity. Transnational cinema reflects the complexity of a post-colonial and post-communist continent, as extensively discussed by Dina Iordanova in Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg's volume on contemporary European migrant and diasporic films. The works of the Turkish-Italian film-director Ferzan Ozpetek discuss both the issue

---

<sup>174</sup> 'Her laughter disconcerts me, I realise she doesn't mind, perhaps she is even taking advantage of the situation, I am alone in my frustration, if she loves me, she does as statues of ice do, I contemplate her inaccessible beauty, if death overwhelms us, if we succumb to her, it is because she is beautiful and it is impossible to make love to her.' 106

of hybridity and that of gender and sexual identities, along with the themes of class and health.

Arguably, Ozpetek's flirts with clichés dear to the masses are suitable in the exposure of identity as relative and fluid. A relativist critique of essentialist norms pervades European cultural manifestations. With a Foucauldian philosophical approach and Crenshawian attention to the intersections of social differences, Ozpetek's relativist representations of otherness can be interpreted in relation to relevant Italian and European texts. With its elaborate reflections about the contexts of normative authority, traditional morality, and the individualist illusion of happiness, *Saturno contro* lends itself to a close-reading focused on relativist narratives of otherness. Comparisons with a selection of films and novels from Italy and other European countries may underscore the significance of Ozpetek's cinema for the questions surrounding European identity.

Ozpetek's films rely heavily on melodramatic conventions, which are crossed with estranging elements in the relationships between mise-en-scène and soundtrack. This actively shapes a highly impure audience, torn between pathos and critique. In their volume on art cinema, Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover stress this impurity, which is crucial in channelling critical reflections from niche into mainstream distribution. In Italian film criticism, the controversy between William Hope's emphasis on authorship and that of Alan O'Leary on spectatorship<sup>175</sup> may develop exactly through an exploration of these seemingly contradictory tendencies in such emblematic cases as that of Ferzan Ozpetek.

---

<sup>175</sup> This debate has not taken place in any publications. Dr William Hope and Dr Alan O'Leary have openly discussed this disagreement at the workshops in which this film analysis was first presented, organized within Hope's 2012 co-funded AHRC-Australian Research Council project on Italian political cinema. While O'Leary prefers to engage with the reception of films, too, Hope

The film *Saturno contro* combines soap opera frivolity with social engagement. This film engages with the social problems of health, family, and ethnic origins, by showing these micropolitical issues at work in daily life. Its seemingly easy plot channels into mainstream distribution its radical message of relativist openness to situational ways to deal with these social problems. The group of characters at its centre constitute a miniature radical polis for these social negotiations. Their story supplies a panoramic view on current social issues that recur at a micropolitical level in daily situations.

The writer of fairytales Davide and the young Lorenzo live together in a luxurious villa in Rome. Their respective closest friends are the banker and swimming mate Antonio, married to anti-smoking psychologist Angelica with two children, and Roberta, who divides her time between astrological predictions and drug consumption. Two more friends about the same age as Davide are his ex Sergio and the Turkish interpreter Neval, married to policeman Roberto. A new friend in this group is Paolo, a young doctor who admires and emulates Davide's fairytales. As they are gathered together one evening, Roberta finds out that she has Saturn in astrological opposition and Neval is utterly harsh on Lorenzo, as he seems to be obsessive about planning weekends together as if it were a compulsory commitment.

Meanwhile, Lorenzo is worried about Antonio's secret affair with the attractive florist Laura, which disillusiones Lorenzo's ideals of safety and everlasting love. As Neval's harshness and the danger that Antonio and Angelica may divorce utterly dishearten him, Lorenzo finds relief only in Roberta's light-

---

claims this aspect to be only a consumerist and post-capitalist detraction from the author's intentions.

heartedness, not to mention her drugs. He also tells her that he wishes he were like her. When they are all at the dining table, Lorenzo faints and falls into a coma, which Roberta secretly believes to be due to drug consumption. Her sense of guilt keeps her awake at night. Lorenzo's death and Davide's mourning look inexorable and, meanwhile, Angelica and Antonio decide to break up. After Lorenzo's burial, everybody is worried about Davide, who will not answer their insistent phone calls. As they eventually make him a surprise and visit him at his holiday house, they all finally begin again to share stories and laugh, also when playing table tennis one less gloomy morning.

This mix of seeming light-heartedness and social engagement belongs to the features of global art cinema. As explained by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, this matching of strikingly different themes and styles is found also in Italian Neorealist films and recent European hybrid films, through a combination of light and heavy tones that construct an 'impure' audience. Both pure intellectual engagement and a sometimes pathetic or even grotesque bodily emotive response are spurred by this kind of film, where aesthetic estrangement is woven together with a virtual opening up to otherness thanks to ironic and caricatured representations of normality. Ferzan Ozpetek's films are no exception.

A look away from what may lead to an easy classification of *Saturno contro* as a classical example of cheesy silly drama allows for a reading of its underlying political messages. However, this can best be done by first acknowledging its clear debts to the sentimental genre. Choral frames and theatrical close-ups crowd the film's scenes. Frequent crying and inflated emotions leave a cheesy aftertaste. The screen is dominated by rich interiors of

luxurious homes. Along with heartbreaking musical intermezzos, cheap jokes and comic events welcome the audience into a film that looks like an easy entertainment show. Nevertheless, strong hints of social critique show the need to read beyond so much superficiality and banality, underneath whose overly perfumed soft skin are a shaking multitude of critical statements, profitable promotional tricks aside. It is worthwhile peeling off this superficial layer so as to lay bare the rich political messages of this film.

*Saturno contro* shakes up mainstream views on social life and unveils the micropolitical action of daily prejudices, as it shows that their taken for granted foundations are actually weak and fluid. This film delves into the private matters of a group of friends only to show a number of urgent public issues in a micropolitics of daily doings. The private and the public domains are mediated in and through the film's critique of female and male gender norms. This is particularly apparent in the subversive gender performance of the three singles Roberta, Paolo and Sergio, who are painted with daring Chiaravaggio-esque chiaroscuros. As is often the case in Ferzan Ozpetek's films, this critique of gender explores also sexual wishes that subvert moral and modern norms of gender performance. An overemphasis on gender, nonetheless, risks again classifying this film with the genre label of sentimental drama or gay hybrid movie. These genres typically privilege the private sphere and leave out any statements engaged with the public, save those inherent in their standard categories and sweeping generalizations with respect to gender.

Conversely, *Saturno contro* transcends the sentimental and subculture genres precisely through its gender critique, which stretches to unveil the shaky

foundations of such socio-political categories as not only gender and ethnicity, but also economic class and health. From its claustrophobic close-ups and interiors with Lorenzo's miserable and sublime body~corpse to its choral frames zooming in on the chameleonic creative force incarnated both in Davide's mind with his fleeting fairytales and in Neval's grotesque, corpulent cornucopia-like body, the film exposes the surreptitious perpetuation of moral norms in the modern process of juridical medicalization, which objectifies bodily and mental health both for the single subject and for groups of subjects who are denied the legal status of family, let alone any subjects having multiple positions across historically distinct ethnic groups. A closer look at health, family, and origins shows this critique in the film.

A ghastly side character who embodies modern medicine is Lorenzo's pale and dull nurse. She plays a crucial role as a modern missionary, against whose work a symbolic link is made between the forbidden practice of euthanasia and the two magical practices discredited by moral and modern standards and cultivated by Roberta, who plays the role of an astrologist and lotophagous – that is, drug-consuming – witch. Lotophagy, astrology, and euthanasia run counter mainstream morality and modern medicine. The young urban witch-nymph-bacchante and the nurse are the two fairytale characters who symbolize the eponymous contrast of the dark planet and nefarious god Saturn in opposition to the endurance of mortal moral and modern things in their current state.

On the one hand, the astrologist and lotophagous witch Roberta foreshadows the shadowy and fleeting character of each state, while Lorenzo hopes in vain that all may last evermore and hence falls into a coma. On the other hand, his nurse stages the character of the dull employee, who paradoxically



abuses alcohol in the night and with immense hypocrisy takes the trouble to stress that, for the law, 'gli amici non contano un cazzo [sic]' [friends don't fucking count], even though Lorenzo's friends worry about his parents' wishes. She also answers with a telling indignant silence when Angelica wonders about an illegal break in the medical practices that keep Lorenzo's doomed body alive. Modern medicine and the law have to follow their perfect course stemmed from the ideology of modern science, even when saturnine astral influences are in fatal opposition. The film's shift from the mythical warmth of its initial colourful scenes to the bloodless and sterilized blinding white light inside the hospital's narrow spaces gives a visual hint of the tension between, on the one hand, the magic of the openness to and ecstasy in any unforeseen events that may lead astray from the normal path through tortuous sideways and, on the other, the antisaturnine biopolitics of paralysis that rules both moral and modern categories of the medico-legal state machinery.

Lorenzo's body marks this shift in its downfall from the parties to a coma. No wonder it is precisely this character's sublime young body which is sacrificed to the greedy Saturn so as to show that nothing lasts forever. This stroke of merciless fate gives a chance to see that every subject is inexorably situational, above all when frail class privilege intersects with the unfair treatment reserved to groups of subjects who are denied the legal status of family. Additionally, besides raising the issue of their legalization, the disastrous outcomes of drugs consumed and abused in the higher socio-economic layer of the population are laden with two strong political implications. To begin with, they confirm the high degree of alienation affecting also the wealthier in industrial and capitalist societies.

Moreover, they underscore the persistence of illegal and unhealthy practices also among the richer, contrary to the social stigma hitting the poorer with the ideological aim to justify competition and inequality. This explains that, as with Ferzan Ozpetek's film *Cuore sacro*, *Saturno contro* takes the viewers into sumptuous interiors of bourgeois houses only in order to denounce all the unfairness hidden behind luxury and middle-class manners.

The deployment of a female character associated with magical practices that subvert bourgeois values follows a common pattern, which can be found also in the latest films directed by the Dane Lars von Trier, in the music videos by the Italian American artist Lady Gaga, and recent novels by Isabella Santacroce. Also in *Saturno contro*, this trope serves a socially engaged function. Roberta demeans all features of everyday bourgeois rituals and keeps making fun of all serious occasions, including the introduction of the young doctor and smoker Paolo to among others the anti-smoking psychologist Angelica, when they are all at Davide's at the beginning. In a scene that reveals her saturnine biopolitics in the hospital's courtyard with breathtaking extradiegetic music, Roberta treats an old wheelchair lady with a clandestine pull from her cigarette and earns a deep thankful look from her in return. Unlike Lorenzo, she will not long for safety and comfort, but just for a little success that she never had the luck to gain. Her willingness to follow Saturn in opposition stands for her openness to social change in relation to mainstream moral and modern middle-class views on health and sickness.

A babysitter from the Philippines tries in vain to open Antonio's eyes, as he fails to notice his children's fights in his wife's and his own absence. This

subsumes the ironic mismatch of, on the one hand, the split of divorce looming over this heteronormative family and, on the other, the playful erotic hedonism that reigns in Davide and Lorenzo's home. Way beyond all moral and modern inhibitions, virtuoso jokes throughout their dialogues with all characters gathered together hint at the power of self-fashioning through storytelling. Telling fairytales and stories around a set table turns out to be a ubiquitous power that makes bonds whose ranking is paradoxically not lower than those which have been granted the legal status of family, as with the too busy parents Angelica and Antonio. Rather than a clinical and hostile, judgmental gaze towards such non-traditional families as that of the same-sex male couple Davide and Lorenzo that usurp family bonds reserved to couples who can make children, this film deploys an ironic glance. This glance unveils the shaky grounds of taken for granted doings and, thus, un-grounds those beliefs which are deeply entrenched in the moral and modern system of family.

While the gaze of morals and medicine confines family bonds to making children as their main goal, the glance of irony shows a freakily wide range of multiple bonds that deserve the legal status of family in various micropolitical daily situations, to use the Foucauldian terms of gaze and glance following Mieke Bal's and Ernst van Alphen's analyses. Far from staring at Davide and Lorenzo as if they were two abominable or pathological subjects in a freak show, this film gives voice to de facto family bonds existing between them and with other characters in the course of the adverse events which are ironically announced by their saturnine horoscope. That what features here is a disarming ironic glance, rather than a hostile armed gaze, is staged in frequent frames with mirror

reflections and make-up in several scenes, which underscores a ceaseless self-making and remaking through sharing with others and splitting one's self into multiple images and splinters by endlessly making up and telling ever new stories, far beyond any absolutely and universally valid moral or modern set of natural laws. Characters wear multiple selves as masks, whose shape is relative to the Others in each different situation.

With a sound and colour tribute to Pedro Almodóvar's Spain, Antonio's werewolf-like metamorphosis down a crowded street follows an eroticism that escapes and subverts middle-class family norms. A mature father is here unmasked and masked again as a docile victim of his lover's seductive powers, as in Ozpetek's later film *Mine vaganti*. What looked like a perfect model of parenthood ends up in a fiasco, as Angelica and Antonio get caught up in their own fights and forget to appease those between their neglected children. In a telling parallel, what looked like a happy, albeit unusual family comes to an end, as Lorenzo's friends eventually have no rights over his body in hospital. This ironic glance hints at how other kinds of bonds earn the same rights as legally recognized families, regardless of their moral goal to serve God's creation and their modern meaning for biological reproduction.

One scene stages the view of identity and gender as a set of elusive speech genres which are relative to bonds and links defined through discursive utterances within given situations. Davide harshly tells Antonio that he is unable to create his family story and his own identity following the fairytale performance genre which belongs to the traditional gender discourses of marriage and parenthood chosen by Angelica and Antonio himself. The room's dim light and dark colours are

semiotic signs underscoring this scene's richness in meaning. This short monologue reminds the audience that this film is experimenting exactly on unusual blends of male and female gender performances and of sentimental and minority film genres. The outcome of these genre and gender blends is precisely a fairytale whose unfolding un-grounds and lets down all expectations for a happy ending featuring the heroic triumph of a prince with a princess. As with the novels by Luigi Pirandello, Umberto Eco, and Alessandro Baricco, this film's fictional text reflects on fiction itself as the only source left whence spring manifold soft kinds of belonging and selfhood, way beyond the stiff edges of any universal or eternal normative grounds. As suggested by a breathtaking circular frame in the closing scene to the sinister sound of Lorenzo's ghastly voice saying that he hopes all will last forever – with the tennis table in the middle, first surrounded by the characters playing and, then, left to spoil and ruin under the unceasing work of the natural elements – and as reminded also in the closing song through the metaphor of the fleeting wind, no kind of family, man, woman, child, or otherwise known collective or singular subject enjoys endurance eternally.

Also ancestral strives between insiders and outsiders of any ethnic groups are ephemeral, as soon as they fall under saturnine astral influences. An unknown girl crying her heart out in hospital after a brief telephone call in a language from the former communist bloc without subtitles and all characters' immediate visceral empathy with her in a choral frame aptly translate the political message of transnational proximity which is conveyed by this film. Oriental sounds, tastes, and colours underscore the cultural closeness of Italy and Turkey from the very first sequence at Davide and Lorenzo's home. That Neval is Turkish comes up in

a blatant way only late in the film, when Lorenzo's stepmother comes to the hospital and, on hearing her name, asks her, 'Foreigner?', and hears back her hilarious reply, 'No, Turkish'. These quick script lines sum up a fitting political polisemy. Recent European cinema often deals precisely with migratory flows from the south and the east, as explained by Dina Iordanova. Such at first glance taken for granted statements as those about Turkish and Balkan migrants sharing much with their Mediterranean and European host countries or foreigners already always belonging elsewhere with a status of ethnic insiders in their home country are points clearly made in this film with significant political implications.

While the German director Fatih Akın rather dwells on sexist violence in Europe and Turkey, Ozpetek clearly chooses to show positive resemblances between this European Union candidate and one of the Union's founding members. Mediterranean colours and tastes soften differences and stress Neval's position as an outsider well inside the mainstream Italian ethnic group. As in *Le fate ignoranti* and other films by Ozpetek, tables set for communal meals supply crucial moments of manifold storytellings with dizzy remakings of telling Selves and listening Others, along with unforeseen polemic breaks. Notably, a recurring use of foreign background songs sung by allophone singers enables the film's soundtrack to translate the untranslatable hybridization of a global Italy, whilst deftly circumventing the fashionable temptations of Hollywood or Bollywood style Americanisms or Anglisms. The character of Neval stands out as a glorious global/local anti-diva, whose female emancipation encompasses both a self-ironic celebration of her body – which is marked as grotesque and abject due to its weight that both moral asceticism and modern medicine label as unfit – and her

happy marriage with a quixotic mild policeman without children, contrary to both moral and modern rules.

Neval acts as a foreigner who stopped acting as a foreigner, whereas Davide's ex Sergio keeps acting as a 'frocio' [faggot]. Nonetheless, his exhilarating lines are strikingly close to Neval's overcoming of ancestral opposites. It is not to overlook that, conversely, she keeps acting as a fat woman. Sergio's versatile styles and registers show that, parallel to foreigners who stop acting as foreigners and fat women who stop feeling shame, those whose sexual practices bear the moral and modern label of deviance can stop acting as deviants thanks to relativist irony, which un-grounds moral and modern ideological grounds. This film's rejection of ethnic labels stretches to question also sexual and other labels, as also hinted at by Paolo's openness to intimacy with both sexes which is evident from an early scene. Conversely, Neval's overcoming of ethnic otherness adapts an emancipatory motif from the sexual revolution to the case of recent migrants in Italy and Europe.

A longer quote from the context of the sexual revolution may do justice to this film's political message in favour of extending legal recognition of families and, above all, show the link of this social statement with Neval's ethnic troublemaking. This quotation originates from underground homosexual subcultural circles in the States, and its political engagement can be useful in discussing the film:

The faggots and their friends and the women who love women know that for a while they can find some safety in the confusion they can create. [...]

Yet at some point, collectively, they will begin to know that the men will continue as long as they continue. They can play with the men's categories to try to neutralize the men's guns. Yet this will not make them free. [...] The men will not stop for they have nothing else to do. [...] The faggots and their friends and the women who love women can, they begin to know, stop and do no-thing. [...]

They will begin slowly. They will fast a few days at a time until they do not need to eat unless they want to eat. They will put aside, from time to time, their magic substances and take them only when they want to. They will begin to abstain from sex to rest from the exhausting chase and get. They will stop flirting and seducing until they no longer need another warm body to feel real. Then they can make love when they want to. As what they need decreases, their activity decreases. They will then be close to being no-thing and therefore close to not being what the men created them to be. They will cease to be other and the men will begin to fear for their own sanity.

[...] [The men] need the faggots and their friends in order to know who they are not. But the faggots and their friends will no longer need the men. [...] [T]hey can do anything. But they will not need. And when the faggots and their friends cease being the faggots and their friends, the deathly dance of the men will [...] wane and a new dance will begin [...].<sup>176</sup>

[Larry Mitchell, *The Faggots and Their Friends* (New York: Calamus Books, 1977), 109-10]

---

<sup>176</sup> Larry Mitchell provides an exquisite satire of sexual bigotry. Clearly, the mood captured by and condensed in this passage is eloquently echoed in Ozpetek's work.



Neval's role is central in *Saturno contro*. This interpreter serves an intermediary function precisely as a friend of faggots who stopped being faggots and as a foreigner who stopped being a foreigner. She stages a European and Mediterranean mix akin to Franco Cassano's meridian thought, which Tiziana Ferrero-Regis finds also in Gianni Amelio's and Giuseppe Tornatore's films. Her alter ego – that is, the character of Angelica – captivates the audience precisely through her gradual transformation whereby she eventually embraces Neval's non-conformity. Along with Angelica, the viewers are called to follow this opening to ethnic and sexual otherness.

A similar reversal of power relationships marked by the triumph of queer woman on straight man is staged in *Huit femmes* by François Ozon. This musical comedy supplies a metousiastic narration of Marcel's feigned death meant to spark and re-enact the stories of eight women in his life, which leads to his final suicide. His sister Pierrette seduces his maid Madame Chanel and his neglected wife Gaby, which is a symbolical revenge on his abuse of power evident particularly in his sexual violence on his eldest daughter Suzon. His youngest daughter Catherine, his lover Louise, his sister-in-law Augustine, and his mother-in-law called by all Mamy witness the unfolding drama.

As with the Italian film, the French work hinges on the anti-essentialist power of storytelling. This is enhanced by the use of singing and dancing performed by the actresses. The rich interiors and the claustrophobic setting of Marcel's living room become the stage of their relativist narrations, which defy Marcel's authority and denounce the violence of his essentialist masculinity. Both

the French film and the Italian work discussed above largely exploit and expose genre conventions for an effective relativist overthrow of heteronormative gender relationships.

In so many disparate forms as it takes, be it a moth, a plough-man, or a horse, existence looks like a frantic movement which ceases only in its final consumption. This is condensed in the image of a helpless moth violently battering with his wings on the cold surface of a piano till he dies, which is a mesmerising scene of Chris Kraus' 2007 film *Vier Minuten*. This scene also condenses the deeper meaning of the film's story. Since the Nazi time, Gertrud Krüger has devoted all her life to music and ends up as the piano teacher of a women's prison, where 20-year old Jenny von Loeben is kept. Both women bear the indelible traces of trauma, as the old teacher's only love was a communist woman tortured and killed by the Nazis, and the young pupil used to be sexually abused by her father and expresses all her inner rage in frequent acts of extreme violence. Frau Krüger is overwhelmed by Jenny's musical talent and offers her help to make her fulfil it, preparing her for a prestigious contest. Once on the stage, instead of playing the long-studied Schumann piece, Jenny takes her chance to finally express herself without restraints in a virtuoso four-minute performance with elements of jazz and experimentation pushed to the use of her whole body hitting the piano as percussions, with an extraordinary energy. The audience is enthusiastic and even Frau Krüger puts aside her contempt for alternative music to toast Jenny's free expression, as the young pianist makes her public a curtsy and is handcuffed again. Like a moth inexorably battering his wings for the duration

of his existence, Jenny enjoys to the full her opportunity while bearing her life in captivity.

Like a moth restlessly battering his wings against the corners to which he flutters without pause in the prison of a window pane, Jenny struggles to come to terms with her trauma in the prison where she is detained. Similarly, Frau Krüger faces every moment the painful memories of her own trauma in the prison of existence. With her strict discipline as a classical pianist, she disdains her pupil's "nigger music" full of rage and free improvisation. Nevertheless, she realises that Jenny has got a "gift" and, along with it, the "mission" (or task, *Aufgabe*) to fulfil her potential as a musician. In her turn, Jenny realises that the old lady is the key for her to express her potentiality, her *power* within the constraints of prison. Therefore, she accepts to conform herself to the teacher's severe discipline and pass the selection for the contest, only to finally express her individuality in her unexpectedly free performance, after which she can be handcuffed again and continue living in prison with a new awareness of her existence. On her part, Frau Krüger expresses herself, too, by crowning her career with her pupil's success in the theatre, after which she can bear her own existential prison of traumatic memories with a new self-awareness. Teacher and pupil ultimately assert themselves within the constraints of their trauma-marked existence, like a moth enjoying to the full his possibilities, albeit meagre, of pleasure.

Jenny reaches the highest target to which she could aspire from her position as a detainee thanks to the discipline that she learns from Frau Krüger only to eventually break free in her final experimental performance. What the stories of Jenny and Josef have in common is the realisation of the Nietzschean

will to power. In fact, both Jenny and Josef come to terms with the constraints imposed on their individual freedom by the institution in which they consume their lives, either a real prison or the embellished prison of the game's province, by conforming to the Others only to the aim of expressing their Selves. This intertextual parallel hints at the importance of Nietzsche's concept of the will to power for an interpretation of the representation of existential captivity in *Vier Minuten*.

In *Vier Minuten*, Jenny overmanly embraces the eternal recurrence of the constraints imposed on her individual freedom. Not for a moment does she indulge in the sweet hope of going out of prison. With this overmanly *amor fati*, she invests all her energy in her personal power: music. Like Josef in the game's province, Jenny overcomes her peers in prison by learning from the teacher the discipline to reach the best which she can attain, namely passing the selection for the contest. Her fear of her peers' aggression is an expression of her will to power, as it endows her with the emotional weapon to be ready for any attack that might jeopardise her ability to continue playing. In fact, when her jail-mate sets her arm on fire in the night she is well-prepared to take action, eventually hitting her pyromaniac jail-mate almost to death.

On the other hand, Frau Krüger's rationality is a manifestation of her will to power, as well. Her demoniac plan to get Jenny out of jail for the final performance, even though she should stay in prison due to an unjust punishment, is studied to the most minute details and ultimately serves the teacher's will to crown her career with her pupil's success in the theatre at the prestigious contest. Like the detainee, the teacher has to overcome the constraints imposed on her

individual freedom by the system to which she belongs. In this sense, every existing being is heir to some condition of captivity indebted to the very fact of existence. This existential captivity can be faced only by following one's will to power, like the film's characters.

By presenting particular dramatic situations to reveal a general motif of existence in an Aristotelian way, *Vier Minuten* can be seen as a piece of authentic post-apocalyptic art. In spite of the crisis of representation that followed the historical trauma of the shoah, this film represents and artistically re-elaborates the history- and life-based specific suffering of the characters to sublimate it into an aesthetic dimension where a trans-historical feature of existence is disclosed. In a metafictional way, the final piano performance in which Jenny sublimates all the rage accumulated and the pain endured hints at the possibility offered by art to represent life in all its aspects, even the most problematic ones from an ethical point of view, for a cathartic purpose.

### *Critical Desire in Literary and Filmic Discourses*

We have examined the undoing and re-doing of gender identifiers mainly in the novels *Das Parfum* and *V.M. 18* and in the films *Saturno contro* and *Vier Minuten*. Their metousiastic answer to gender essentialism revolves around the critique of masculinity, family, marriage, and normative sexuality through the unrestrained expression of desire. The literary and filmic discourses upheld in

their narratives centre on the critical desire to reinvent one's gender and sexual selfhood over and again. The category of critical desire is a useful conceptual tool which adds the aspect of gender identity to the questions of the healthy or unhealthy body and hierarchies of age, considered in the previous chapters. This takes us to one final analytical part of this thesis, in which the aspect of ethnicity comes to the foreground.

## V. HUBRIS FROM COSMIC TRAGEDIES TO ETHNIC HYBRIDITY

Cultural crossbreeding is the key feature of a metousiastic relativism tied up to the socio-political setting of European identity in an ever larger union of states.

Global flows and cross-cultural encounters mark the renegotiation of national and transnational belonging. Intercultural experiences are portrayed through daring characters, whose transnational hubris allows readers and watchers to question and challenge cultural borders in the films and novels explored in this final chapter. In particular, the films *La sconosciuta* [The Unknown Woman] by Giuseppe Tornatore and *Auf der anderen Seite* [On the Other Hand / The Edge of Heaven] by Fatih Akın zoom in on migration to Italy and Germany. Nationalist imperialism outside and within Europe in a not too distant past are skilfully deconstructed in the novels *Oceano mare* [Ocean Sea] by Alessandro Baricco and *Im Krebsgang* [Crabwalk] by Günter Grass. The relativist hubris of these works shapes an elaborate cross-cultural awareness.

Transnational identities beyond a sense of national belonging founded on the discourse of blood and soil are built in opposition to the nationalist envisioning of race and ethnicity:

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematics of blood was sometimes called upon to lend their entire historical weight towards revitalizing the political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at

this point (racism in its modern, ‘biologizing’ statist form). It was then that the whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health and everyday life, received their colour and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race.<sup>177</sup>

The metousiastic relativism embodied by the four main portrayals of belonging in this chapter revolves around the knocking down and overcoming of cultural walls raised by the ideologies of national pride and purity. Ethnic rankings are exposed and debunked in the stories told by relativist films and novels dealing with the theme of transnational belonging.

The film by Tornatore is analysed also through a comparison to the Dutch film *Nadine* by Erik de Bruyn. An apt counterpoint to the reading of Akin’s film is, then, supplied by the Portuguese film *Um filme falado* by Manoel de Oliveira, whose sophisticated and sometimes enigmatic hints deserve a particularly long in-depth close-reading. The last section deals with the cultural memory of imperialism in the two novels from the 1990s and the 2000s, with a comparison to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. These films and novels converge in a vision of possible European

---

<sup>177</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (1984), p. 149



identities wherein national pride and ethnic awareness are dramatically reframed.

### *Dis-estrangement*

Set in such diverse European sceneries as Maastricht and Southern Italy, Erik de Bruyn's film *Nadine* (2007) and Giuseppe Tornatore's *La sconosciuta* ('The Unknown Woman') (2006) reflect the problematic complexities of intersecting crucial differences in the twenty-first century. This section focuses on filmic narratives of transnational estrangement in and beyond Tornatore's Italy. Yearning for motherhood, both Nadine and Irena (alias the mysterious Eastern woman) are represented as concoctions of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In other words, the complexities of the interplay between their multi-layered identities and the simple categories to which they are ascribed by the other characters find expression in the dramas lyrically unfolding before the spectator's eyes.

The unknown woman of Tornatore's film comes from the East and is willing to meet all the needs of the rich North-Italian family that finally employs her as a cleaner and baby-sitter. Her name is Irena, and her recent past in Sicily is shown gradually in powerful flashbacks all along the film, as the past is even stronger than the present. She came from the Ukraine to work in Italy, where she was exploited by Sicilian mafia not only as a prostitute. Irena is shrouded in mystery until late in the film, when her past is back again to balance accounts with

her. Meanwhile, she has engaged in an unusual relationship with the little girl, of whom she is taking care through secret violent trainings to strengthen her sickly body and passive personality. It becomes always clearer that it was to stay with her that Irena made the previous cleaner fall down the stairs and paralyse, to get the chance to replace her.

The shots of the staircase take on a crucial symbolic meaning, which Derek Duncan leads back to the genre of the *film noir* and the topic of hybridity by means of readings of these subjects carried out by Mary Wood in film studies and by Homi Bhabha in transnational studies. As Duncan points out, '[t]he staircase [...] is shot through a range of framing techniques that induce a sense of claustrophobia and vertigo in the spectator'.<sup>178</sup> A similar sense of oppressive indoor spaces is echoed in the seemingly brutal trainings which Irena imparts on the little girl when she walks up the stairs. This architectural element constitutes a space where boundaries are articulated, which Wood identifies as a classic feature of the noir genre.<sup>179</sup> Her interpretation of such disturbing spaces implies that identity thresholds are both upheld and knocked down by means of representations of stairwells. These boundaries of identity are crossed through the movements allowed by the space of the staircase, as fittingly stressed by Bhabha in relation to transnational positionings of otherness and selfhood.<sup>180</sup> The insistent portrayals of Irena walking up and down the stairs reaffirm both her social mobility and the weight of race and class rankings which locate her at the lower end of the transnational abyss.

---

<sup>178</sup> Derek Duncan (2011), 'Double Time: Facing the Future in Migration's Past', *California Italian Studies* 2(1), p. 16.

<sup>179</sup> Mary Wood (2007), 'Italian *film noir*', in *European Film Noir*, ed. by Andrew Spicer, Manchester: Manchester University Press (236-72), p. 244.

<sup>180</sup> Homi K. Bhabha (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 4.

Once Irena's pimp finds her, the audience is confronted with her shocking story. Exploited in Sicilian prostitution, she and her colleagues were assigned the most sadistic clients, impregnated, and used as child-bearers for illegal adoptions. Irena had finally managed to escape from her pimp with a huge amount of his money, and decided to look for her last child, whose father was her only love. As the boss finally finds Irena, she manages to escape again only to end up in jail. When she is liberated, after many years, her only concern is still her daughter, whom she can finally embrace in freedom after so much suffering.

The identity of Irena is highly dependent on the situation in which she finds herself. Irena is a woman who migrates from a former communist country to a Western country. Her use of language and her accent, along with her physical features, betray her state of difference and minority. She diverts in several ways from the norm of the society in which she comes to live. Not only is her ethnicity different, above all she is symbolically a non-white in a society that regards her as an opportunist adventurer of material fortune, like the first Irish arrived in America.<sup>181</sup> From this perspective, she is marginalized and confined to a low social status, as she has to strive hard to be given even the humblest employment. Before escaping, she is literally kept in slavery and subjected to all imaginable forms of violence. Like a black female slave, she is exposed to constant sexual assaults and exploited as a children-machine.<sup>182</sup> When she is finally employed as a domestic worker, which she manages only through the corruption of a dubious man and literally disabling the old woman who had the job before, her relationship with the house-mistress is often humiliating and always distressing.

---

<sup>181</sup> Noel Ignatiev (1995), *How the Irish Became White*, London (Routledge), p. 35.

<sup>182</sup> bell hooks (1981), *Ain't I a Woman*, Boston (South End Press), p.15.

She is the unknown, foreign woman shrouded in mystery, and she can never be entirely trusted. The boundaries marked by the liminal space of the staircase noted and analysed by Duncan find further articulation in Irena's interaction with the little girl in vertiginous indoor frames throughout the unfolding of her story.

When she is alone with the little girl, Irena subjects the child to a sort of ritual, in which she practices and exorcises the violence endured. She ties up the little girl, makes her fall down on the softened ground, incites her to rise up, and makes her fall again and again. In this sadistic manifestation, her maternal instinct to strengthen the child's body and personality is combined with the profound desire to exorcise her own suffering through pain sublimation. Irena establishes a kind of communication with the child, whereby she passes on her experience of violence to the little girl. In this lugubrious, yet lyrical contact, sweet feelings of protection and intimate love are blended with the heavy awareness of the omnipresence of violence and pain. Especially in these scenes, as well as throughout the film, Irena's gender performance is versatile, oscillating between the male and the female. Her sexuality is imbued with the macabre perfume of the sado-masochistic games into which she was forced while a sexual slave. She does not succumb to violence; rather, Irena comes to embody violence to the point that she finds in it an authentic way to come into contact with others and herself.

Ultimately, Irena makes sense of her identity in relation to the reproductive regime that she has to serve. Arrived in Italy from the Ukraine, her female role moulded by the traditional patriarchal values of her country is put to the service of the Western industry of mothering. She is just a machine in an illegal, yet society-functional trafficking of children on demand of desperate

candidate parents. Once employed as a domestic worker, her role is to give the child maternal care and affection.<sup>183</sup> First as a slave of the mafia, then as a prisoner of the state, her only existential chance is motherhood, and one that she cannot enjoy until the end. In this sinister dimension, Irena experiences on her skin the perpetuation and furthering of the long-standing anatomy-as-destiny ideology, as she is turned into nothing but her mothering body. The opportunity that she takes involves the emancipatory use of the regulatory practice of reproduction to which she is bound.<sup>184</sup> As the other characters reduce her many faces to her reproductive function, Irena seeks her self-fulfilment in this social construct. The act of escaping from the mothering factory to turn to her own authentic motherhood is subversive in nature. Within the system in which she is entrapped, Irena goes through an odyssey of initiatory gestures to finally embrace her daughter in freedom and give expression to her individuality within the community.

The eponymous protagonist of de Bruyn's film, Nadine is portrayed as a successful forty-year old Dutch woman without a family, which allows the director to deconstruct this cliché. One day she meets again an ex-boyfriend after a long time. In the meanwhile, he got married and just had a baby. In an incomprehensible impulse, Nadine follows him, kidnaps his baby, and runs away with the baby in her car, direction south, destination unknown. Then, what looked as one fragments into many, as the filmic narration is subdivided into a number of parallel story-lines. At the temporal level of the present, we follow at the same time the blind race of Nadine with her kidnapped baby and the desperate parents

---

<sup>183</sup> Hochschild (2001), *Global care chains and emotional surplus value*. In H. Hutten & A. Giddens (Eds.), *On the edge: living with global capitalism*. London: Vintage. p. 137.

<sup>184</sup> Judith Butler (1990), *Gender Trouble*, New York and London (Routledge), p. 23.

looking for them all over, especially along the winding streets of Maastricht, where Nadine used to work. Yet, it is especially in the constantly intersecting flashbacks at two distinct temporal levels of the past that Nadine's identity is gradually, powerfully presented through the distinct bodies of two more actresses beside the main one, and along the complexities and intricacies of her dissonant mental paths, echoing the tortuous roundabouts of the picturesque streets of Maastricht.

At the remotest temporal level, Nadine is a vital and irreverent girl, who paves her way in society thanks to her charisma and beauty. Things change, at the intermediate temporal level, after the death of her parents, when she is an affirmed young model wondering what to do with her life. At a certain point, she becomes obsessed with the idea of making a family of her own. However, her relationships are not long, and somehow she just does not want to stop at a point of stasis. As time goes by, she realizes how important it is for her to have a baby, regardless of a stable relationship. She tries in all imaginable ways to become pregnant, also making recourse to cutting-edge reproduction technologies. Her psychic equilibrium collapses when she sees, in one of the labyrinthine streets of Maastricht, her boyfriend kissing a pregnant woman, apparently bearing his child. Of course, the man in question is the father of the baby that Nadine is taking with her through Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Acores, at the temporal level of the present.

Nadine's identity is constellated by the fortunate intersection of her invisible whiteness and privileged social class, which favour her everywhere in

her career and on her journey.<sup>185</sup> When she kidnaps the baby, she can go far without being noticed, let alone suspected, by the people she comes across. In Belgium this invisible aura of privilege seems to fade away, albeit only for one very short moment, when she is questioned brutally about the baby, actually only because she had left him a moment all alone in the car at a gasoline station. In France and Spain she passes completely unnoticed, and in Portugal, when enough time has passed for the news of her crime to spread to the local authorities, she escapes the police by seducing with her fair skin a charming mechanic engineer in his safe garage. On the ship to the Acores, she is scared to see in a Dutch car a newspaper with her picture; yet, again, her whiteness allows her even the most improbable passage to a scarcely inhabited island in the sun, where she can enjoy the fantastic fairy-tale of her artificial motherhood. In her physical fragments dispersed over the three intersecting time-lines, Nadine's whiteness and her related high status in society are triumphantly unchallenged.

On the other hand, it is possible to observe some changes in Nadine's psychic fragments throughout the film and across the temporal spheres, especially as far as her gender and sexuality are concerned. Overall, Nadine can be characterized as a hypersexual phallic woman, the incarnation and epitome of the Dutch emancipated woman-in-career. Also thanks to her race and class, Nadine has a high self-esteem and walks through society with assured self-confidence, as evident in her volcanic sexual life. From the very start of the film, she is caught in grotesque acts of furious, passionate sexual intercourse with a long list of mostly handsome men. The picture of Nadine ensuing from these scenes is that of a

---

<sup>185</sup> Dyer, R. (1997). *White*. London: Routledge, p. 9.

woman who enjoys to take the lead and to feel to be in control of the situation, also when it comes to the erotic. In this sense, Nadine corresponds somehow to the cliché of the *femme fatale*, with a phallic gender performance of which the emblem is the whole kidnapping and adventurous driving on highways and whatnot. Nadine's psychic fragmentation can be understood in the Hegelian dialectic used by Butler in one interview: she is the synthesis of the thesis of the hypersexual, phallic *femme fatale* and the antithesis of the caring mother, whose life is bound to 'her' baby. This change in Nadine's psyche can be seen especially after the death of her parents, followed by her avid yearning for a family of her own.

The maniac desire for reproduction haunting Nadine can be interpreted in various ways. In one way, this obsession is the intimate symptom of her internalization of the patriarchal precept to make children. To this regard, the reproductive technologies to which she decides to make recourse can be seen as the epitome of the modernized perpetuation of such patriarchal relations.<sup>186</sup> To a certain extent, these technologies have an ambivalent potential, namely both for emancipation from the authority of pre-existing social constructs, and for their furthering in modern societies. The theory of the Social Construction of Technology, or SCOT, can provide fascinating insights into this matter. According to SCOT, every technology presents interpretative flexibility, in so far as it can take on different forms depending on which relevant social group (say, of scientists) wins the rhetorical fight in the socio-political context of the technology

---

<sup>186</sup> Wajcman, J. (1991). Reproductive technology: Delivered into men's hands. In *Feminism confronts technology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 78.



in question.<sup>187</sup> In this light, reproduction technologies cannot escape their relationship with the system of values on which modern societies rest, including the patriarchal imperative to reproduce. Towards the end of the film, Nadine explains that her act (the kidnapping) was meant to make her feel for once how it is to be ‘a real woman’ (‘een echte vrouw’). Her obsession to be a mother can be seen both as emancipatory from the perspective of her capitalistic individualism, and as nostalgic towards an existential condition (that is motherhood itself) which is highly valued within the traditional social paradigm. Her final choice to go and give back the baby, though, highlights that Nadine’s improbable trip culminates in her gaining awareness of a new existential possibility, in which childlessness can be accepted without regrets.

Irena’s and Nadine’s respective revelations of independent motherhood and interdependent childlessness are, thus, opposite and complementary momentary solutions to the dilemmas faced by their intersections of gender and ethnicity, as well as class. The two films give a relativist answer to the riddle of national and transnational belonging with respect to families across cultural borders. The essence or *ousia* of foreignness and whiteness is overcome and reframed by means of heroic hubris. This metousiastic shift in both films shapes anew the identities of the two sinister heroines.

---

<sup>187</sup> Bijker, W.E, Hughes, Th.P., & Pinch, T.J. (1987). *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*. Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, p. 46.

### *Outlining Hybrid Horizons*

Relativist frames of motherhood and childlessness overcoming nationalist essential purity through hubris and hybridity are now compared to non-vertical perspectives of metousiastic daughterhood, whose relativist horizons at the border between Islamic dogmas and German bourgeois pettiness find space in *Auf der anderen Seite* by Fatih Akin. A very young Portuguese daughter with her seemingly banal Arabian doll and yet more apt relativist mothers and childless characters from *Um filme falado* by Manoel de Oliveira provide a fitting frame to move on to and delve into Islamophobia portrayed in metousiastic European films. Muslim migrants are central in Fatih Akin's *Auf der anderen Seite*, where a German daughter and the daughter of a Turkish migrant come to terms with the presence and the absence of their respective mothers. The daughters of both films take on meaningful symbolic roles in the setting of European integration and intercultural conflicts. This section turns to the horizon marked by Islam as a cause for concern in Akin's Germany and Europe.

The two films face the audience with extreme tragic representations. As noted by Thomas Elsaesser, *Auf der anderen Seite* contrasts starkly to:

the Romeo and Juliet melodramas of multicultural star-crossed lovers or the comedies of mistaken ethnic or national stereotypes found in the "Greek wedding" genre. In both cases, the hyphenation of ethnic or religious identities joins too comfortably or separates too neatly what in reality remain messy sets of generational tensions, universal moral dilemmas, emotional ambivalences, and divided loyalties. Instead, Akin

prefers, like Fassbinder, perversely improbable love stories, sadistic scapegoating, and suicidal sacrifices. (p. 4)

The central love story, in fact, is one where Lotte takes home her girlfriend Ayten *alias* Gul, who comes to Germany looking for her missing mother. Meanwhile, Lotte's mother has to accept her daughter's involvement in the search. Actually, Gul's mother is dead, as she is murdered by one of her customers of Turkish origin who demanded more loyalty than guaranteed by her profession as a prostitute. Back in Turkey, Gul is jailed due to political dissidence and Lotte is murdered by street-robbers while trying to help Kurdish activists. Her mother, who eventually visits Turkey, and Gul, who meets in a bookshop the son of the man who killed her mother in Germany, are left to deal with their loss in this tragic cross-border journey. The young bookshop keeper, Nejat, is the character who marks the frame of their drama, as his liminality in the beginning and his return to Turkey in the end sum up the problem of cultural hyphenation central to the main plot.

In *Um filme falado*, Rosa Maria is a professor of history at the University of Lisbon who wants to visit and show her little daughter, Maria Joana, the breathtaking historical places of the Mediterranean Sea, in a cruise of which the final destination is India, where her husband works. On the same ship, three women, namely a French businesswoman, an Italian model, and a Greek singer, come together as special guests of the captain, an American of Polish descent. In the overlapping of their conversations with Rosa Maria's answers to her child's innocently asked ocean-deep questions, an enthralling world is disclosed in which

the horrors of reality and the temptations of utopia intermesh in a fascinating counterpoint of war and peace. As the title ‘a talking film’ suggests, verbal communication is central, as every character speaks in her/his own language and (almost) all characters understand each other. All the threads of the discussions seem to be harmoniously arranged in a pattern that describes a plurality of different cultures. The fugue saturates when Maria Joana and her mother join the captain’s table, and the grand finale literally explodes, as the unpredictable occurs and, after a stop in the Middle East, a bomb blows up the ship. Everyone survives the terrorist attack, except Rosa Maria and her little daughter, who did not want to abandon in the cabin the oriental doll received as a present from the captain. The two films focus on marginal and privileged cross-border positions, respectively. They both stress the tense ties of European countries to Muslim cultures through portrayals of daughters who raise questions for the previous generations.

*Um filme falado* and *Auf der anderen Seite* touch on controversial social and political implications of transnational ethical dilemmas.<sup>188</sup> Both films provide eloquent expressions of the artistic deployment of cinematic technology to represent and re-elaborate the clash-of-civilizations Angst that has ensued from the recent explosion of Islamophobic discourses, especially after 9/11. The Portuguese film embeds within the stories of cultures’ rise and fall told during the voyage the historical configuration of European cultural pluralism falling into the clash between American global imperialism and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

---

<sup>188</sup> As Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* (1999) witnesses, arts can be a moral laboratory in which “sympathising imagination” can open up otherwise unexplored avenues of reflection (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 355). Both in his choice to discuss animals’ rights in an artistic form and in the primacy of poetry over philosophy contended in the lecture-novel, the lecturer-writer shows how arts can unleash daring speculations, such as the parallel between the meat industry and the shoah, that stimulate important reflections on ethic issues.

The German film sketches the clash between European integration and Islamic violations of human rights. *Auf der anderen Seite* and *Um filme falado* present a cinematic aesthetics that, like in Aristotelian poetics, takes inspiration from particular historical facts to recognize the general, trans-historical constellations of conflict.

Such function of art will be defended in this film analysis, as it has come under attack especially after the shoah. Although the shoah has been conceived as something that can only be represented in its objective factuality and particularity, its artistic representation tends towards the general patterns of life,<sup>189</sup> e.g. in Celan's poems conveying the universal pattern of cruelty behind the particular and unique circumstances artistically re-elaborated.<sup>190</sup> After the apocalypse of the twentieth century and in spite of Adorno's lapidary dictum that all poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, Aristotelian poetics has survived as a possibility to make art elevate particular facts to the general motifs of experience.<sup>191</sup> *Um filme falado* and *Auf der anderen Seite* take the audience on a voyage through the unspeakably tragic dilemmas of contemporary European multiculturalism and to the arcane movement of humanity, suspended between fecund creativity and dreadful self-destruction. Representing the fall of European multiculturalism in the clash between western imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, both films explore the general existential motifs of the formation and dissolution of cultures and identities, in a motion where everything constantly changes.

In both films, European cultural pluralism can be seen as attacked from both sides of Euro-American globalization and Islamic fundamentalism. Europe is

---

<sup>189</sup> Bronzwaer 1994

<sup>190</sup> Traverso 1997

<sup>191</sup> Felman & Laub 1992 p. 52.

complicit in this process, in that its cultural norms have failed to challenge successfully the essentialist norms which cause social injustices. On the one hand, the advance of global trends coming from the USA threatens to impose uniformity on European diversity. On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalist rage is directed not only against American imperialism, but also against Europe as the cradle of the West. Silent as the waves of the sea, the media never appear directly in the Portuguese film and, yet, mediation is all-pervasive, as at the centre of the film lies the intercultural communication unfolding in the multilingual dialogues. Involving intercultural dialogue, mediation is subtly presented as a vital aspect of European multiculturalism also in the German film. The point of departure of the analysis will be a discussion of the filmic representation of western globalization as an erosive force which jeopardizes the survival of European multiculturalism. Then, the focus will shift to the representation of Islamic fundamentalism as the second disruptive force in contrast to which European cultural pluralism is given shape. Finally, the role of mediation in the filmic representation of European cultural pluralism will be explored.

Thus, the representation of European cultural pluralism in the two films will be analysed by looking at its opposition to both western globalization and Islamic fundamentalism, and, ultimately, at its bond to intercultural mediation. All along, the relevant elements of the films will be, first, interpreted within the coherent semiotic whole of which they are constituent components. In fact, internal coherence is best suited to qualify true interpretations, as all interpretations can be put to test by verifying whether they are, indeed, confirmed by the other elements of the text (Eco, 1990, p. 61). Subsequently, the film's

insights will be used to enrich Elsaesser's and Eyny and Zubatov's interpretations of the two filmic journeys as a paradoxical portrayal of generational burdens and as a reversal of the Odyssey, respectively. A new interpretation will, thus, be proposed, which accounts for their representation of European cultural pluralism as defined, on the one hand, in opposition to the intercultural conflict between western imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, and, on the other hand, by the intercultural mediation on which it rests. Emphasis is laid upon, on the one hand, the extent to which each film represents the historical configuration of European multiculturalism in the age of European intercultural mediation and western/Islamic intercultural conflict and, on the other hand, both films' Aristotelian scope tending to capture trans-historical features of experience. Much more space and attention is called for by the Portuguese film, owing to its enigmatic minimalist style.

In the German film, the son of a Turkish migrant to Germany, Nejat inhabits a liminal space marked by economic and cultural globalization. The opening flash-forward shows him stopping at a gas station in Turkey, which supplies a subtle hint of ubiquitous oil in a globalized modern world driven by science and technology. As a lecturer in German literature at the University of Hamburg, he resists global trends through his intellectual moderation and openness. Paradoxically, his father is an easier prey to global materialism, lethally blended with traditional family demands. The middle-aged man makes a financial deal with a prostitute of Turkish origin and at last kills her during a violent outburst.

The subplot of the son who overcomes the father through his balance provides the narrative frame for the story of the prostitute's daughter, Ayten also known as Gul. Her mother tells her she sells shoes and secretly works as a prostitute to pay her college fees back in Turkey. The tragic death of this character within this setting of cross-border modern materialism and commodification sketches the drama of fatal global trends whose victims occupy marginal transnational spaces. The Portuguese film, conversely, emphasizes the positions at the centre of global western privilege.

The voyage of eight-year-old Maria Joana starts in Lisbon with the image of people nostalgically waving goodbye, and runs through the monument of Portuguese discoverers, the oil-dependent port of Marseilles, the mythical castle of Naples and the ruins of once glorious Pompeii, the time-consumed temples and lost-for-good statues of Athens' Acropolis, the commercialized church of St. Sophia in Istanbul, the human-labour-made pyramids and enigmatic sphinx of Egypt, the colourful marketplace of the disputed Arab city of Aden; it ends with an explosive farewell in which the ship, voiceless and yet voice-bearing testimony to such high accomplishments of hubris-driven civilization, inexorably sinks in the sea. The shipwreck of European cultural plurality is represented in the film as a result not only of terrorism, but also and even more disconcertingly of globalization. It is no coincidence that the captain of the doomed ship is American, and that the Greek song in the ending implores the north wind for mercy. The film represents European multiculturalism as the victim of American-led globalization, which is in turn the target of Islamic fundamentalism. A closer look at the character of the captain and at the final Greek song can define the



contours of the shapeless, implacable American wind of globalization that drags the European ship straight to disaster.

Captain John Walesa (John Malkovic), an American of Polish descent, invites to his merry table on board of his ship three European women-in-career with a disenchanting vision of society. The ladies constantly mock his artificially charming and flattering behaviour, yet they accept his invitation and play his game. With the captain's 'perfect formula', the three women talk about the cultural decadence of Europe, each in her own language. Greek singer Helene (Irene Papas) laments the loss of her language and culture with tragic expressivity: 'Greece was the cradle of our civilization . . . Greek is spoken only in Greece . . . It is a civilization which has been forgotten.' 'There's nothing more comfortable than to speak one's own language', says nonchalantly Italian model Francesca (Stefania Sandrelli). 'Which is not the case in the E.C.', the captain remarks. 'These days almost everyone speaks English', he adds promptly later on with a badly-concealed note of American pride. However, French businesswoman Delphine (Catherine Deneuve) observes that the only true Americans are the decimated 'Indians', challenging the identity of the captain. 'The English language has colonized the world', Helene adds, but soon after she qualifies that 'it was *not* the basis of our civilization.' As Maria Joana (Filipa de Almeida) and Rosa Maria (Leonor Silveira) speculate looking at them from their table, the captain and the women behave in their conversation as though it were someone's birthday, especially while contemplating the glorious prospect of a utopian civilization under the wise lead of women. 'I think women should rule the world and cure it of all its modern and ancient ills', the captain says. Indeed, the history

presented in the film is made by active and war-like men. The three women express some measure of scepticism about men's ability to erect a liveable world order. After observing that there are no barriers among educated women, Helene adds hesitatingly, 'and men too, I hope.' Francesca says, 'Frankly, I don't know.' 'The E.C. was set up by men and look at the result. Imagine how different it would be, how we would live in peace if the world was ruled by women', Delphine adds. When the captain shows his enthusiasm, the idea falls from the Platonic sky back to material(ist) earth with the businesswoman's cynical joke that she would be committed to providing this perfect world with shops and supermarkets.

The captain's dialogue with his guests can be read as a critique of Europe's cultural decadence under the blow of US-dominated global commerce, which invades even the fantastic dream of a better world (Eyny & Zubatov, 2004). The denunciation of America's illegitimate hegemony is suggested by the paradox of the decline of the Greek language and the rise of English, which is not even the authentic language of the land from where it has spread, nor a cultural language, rather a commercial one. The global community turns around commerce and economy, not culture. In fact, when the Portuguese join the multilingual table they cannot be understood in their language; Portugal is not sufficiently economically developed yet to enjoy full membership in the global community. Even the utopia of a harmonious world order cannot escape the logic of globalization, as this fantastic world, too, would inevitably be constellated by shops and supermarkets. In this light, the film represents American-driven

globalization as an irrevocable, all-pervasive force attacking not only the real, but also the virtual.

The American captain and the European passengers are portrayed with meticulous attention for details in the film. The three women-in-career wear clothes with colours of a highly iconic value. Symbolically, the blue of Delphine, the red of Francesca, and the black of Helene remind of their respective independence, emotionality, and mournfulness. As they gather on the ship, the film draws nearer and nearer to the final disaster. To this regard, their respective characters, described in the colours of their clothes, constitute the ingredients of the (Greek) tragedy of European cultures in the allegory of the film. The blue independence of the French woman is associated to her enlightened ideals of freedom and equality, which are betrayed by the American commercial turn in Western civilization. The red emotionality of the Italian is disciplined and, eventually, suppressed by the strict rules that the model must meet in her career. The black mournfulness of Helene is the last song of the swan, as Europe has forgotten and, thus, lost its Greek origins, corrupted by American economic domination. One after the other, the three women stage the decadence of Europe until its ineluctable close. While they succeed on the stage, the Portuguese mother and daughter are the permanent centre of the film. On the ship, they are the curious spectators of the captain's gallantries, as the shape of the tables suggests. In the camera shots taking them all, the two tables are two of a triangle's angles, of which the third is the door, separated from the foreground by the buffet table. Maria Joana and Rosa Maria are, thus, in the middle ground on the side opposite the door. In the centre and on the foreground lies the captain's table, where the

three symptoms of Europe's decay are brought together before the final explosion. In this carefully studied choreographic arrangement, all attention is directed to the merry table where the film's allegorical tragedy unfolds.

Released in 2003, *Um filme falado* presents a divided pre-9/11 West. The voyage is set in July 2001, like a sombre omen of what would happen shortly after in the real world. In the tragedy hanging over the merry table of the West, Europe and America experience multiculturalism in extremely different ways. The implicit image of a homogeneous America takes shape in contrast to the picture of a culturally diverse Europe, symbolized by its plurality of languages and the potential for mutual understanding. The many passengers on board are in the hands of the one American captain, who seduces his guests with his artificiality. He constantly flatters the European women and gives the European child an Arabian doll as a present, which eventually costs her mother's life and her own. Allegorically, the captain embodies with his fake smile the economic empire of America, an offspring of Europe which eventually conquers and devastates its progenitor as in the boomerang-like spell cast by an overambitious sorcerer's apprentice. In *Um filme falado*, the divide between the Atlantic partners is represented in the absurdist dialogue between the American captain and the European passengers, punctuated by American triumphal ideology, on the one hand, and European disenchantment, on the other hand. The filmic elements analysed point to the metaphor of the captain guiding the ship to catastrophe as American globalization taking European cultural plurality on troublesome waters.

The Greek song performed just before the catastrophic ending can be seen as an allegory of the divided West. In the first part, the singer wonders what has

been of the beauty of a tree that used to be magnificent, of which the inebriating flowers were blown away by the pitiless north wind. In the second part, the singer implores the north wind to blow gently on the beautiful tree. Here, the European metaphor of American cultural erosion takes the shape of the contraposition between the wonderful tree of European cultures and the implacable wind of American neo-liberal imperialism. The simplicity of the song is in striking opposition to the excesses of American show-business, which ironically hints at American roughness in contrast to European depth. The song can be seen as Europe's mournful lamentation of her cultural agony under the shadow of America and the relentless blows of globalization.

While America inclines towards homogenization in the name of the essential unity of human nature as characterized by enlightened rationality, Europe is sensitive to human diversity. This is represented in the film by the contraposition between the plurality of European languages and cultures on the ship, and the presence of the one American captain. The price to pay for the enlargement of the global community to the Portuguese is the linguistic homogenization in which English, 'implacable' as Helene defines it, is the standard language. This distinction between European plurality and American uniformity is also made in the characterization of sophisticated Europeans opposed to the conformist, individualist, and apathetic American<sup>192</sup>. Ultimately, the Greek song denounces American-led globalization as the destructive force operating on Europe. Examining these elements with in mind the catastrophic ending of the film, America is presented as the harbinger of Europe's future of

---

<sup>192</sup> In this respect, the film deploys the expressive tools of the wide repertoire of American-European stereotypical images (Kroes, 1996, p. 16).

cultural atrophy, and the very source of the air of globalization that sweeps over Europe, thus eroding its civilization.

In *Um filme falado*, European cultural pluralism takes shape in contrast to American imperial globalism. The character of the American captain, with his optimistic and secure attitude, is the Other in opposition to whom the bewildering plurality of European languages and cultures can be identified. In the dialogues and in the final song, the film highlights the arbitrariness of American global imperialism, which erodes European civilization. Nevertheless, the implacable north wind is still a *natural* force. Far from being confined to the specific scenario of the twenty-first century intercultural tension, *Um filme falado* elevates the situations characteristic of this period to the existential dimension beyond historical contingency in an Aristotelian way; and it does so exactly by presenting a voyage which, rather than proceeding across space, runs through history. Placing the present decadence of Western civilization onto the grid of time, the film's story acquires meaning by looking at it among the historical monuments of fallen glories which dot the changing landscape of Maria Joana's initiatory voyage. In this light, the film suggests the trans-historical pattern of cultures' rise and fall following the mutable configurations of power in the world. From this perspective, all existing actors on the stage of history are engaged in a constant interaction in which they alternatively win or lose power, in a dancing movement that produces always new cultural forms which are eventually left as the dead monuments of what they once meant. At the level of the cinematic technique, this idea animates the camera shots of the Acropolis. Presented both from far and from near always in all its majestic size and desolate aura, the emblematic monument of

Greek culture is shown as an impressive complex of abandoned ruins, deprived of its primordial function. In this display of ineluctable decay and past glory, the film represents the trans-historical motif of the caducity of existence. Exploring simultaneously the present and the past, *Um filme falado* presents a Europe blown away (and, eventually, blown up) by the wind of American globalization, while showing that this is only one flow of the inexorable wind of change which sweeps through the monument-dotted voyage of existence.

From the legend of Islam-fighting King Sebastian to the Arab-taken isle of Ceuta, from the myth of the mermaids to Greek mythology and the biblical exodus of the Jews, from the Muslim conquest and destruction of the library of Alexandria to the transformation of the church of St. Sophia into a mosque and, eventually, a museum, many imaginary and real stories are interwoven in the voyage of Maria Joana, like many threads forming together a fabric bearing the hypnotic motif of faith. Like fire, faith warms and lights up the history of civilization providing meaningfulness through the kaleidoscope of myth and religion. Yet, when the fire of faith evades control and explodes in fundamentalism, civilization may be destroyed in the clash of dogmatic beliefs. In *Um filme falado*, European cultural pluralism is defined in opposition to American-led globalization, as well as in contrast to Islamic fundamentalism. The terrorist bomb attack that puts an end to the filmic cruise evokes the fundamentalist violence escalation of Islam in reaction to Europe's medieval (Christian) and US' contemporary (liberalist) crusades. This suggestion is inevitable in the mind of post-9/11 audiences, and it is eloquently achieved in the rich symbolism of the film's script and plot. The representation of Islamic

fundamentalism in the film can be observed in the interrelationship between Rosa Maria's metaphor of the doll and captain John's doll offered to Maria Joana. By lingering on the fascinating correspondence between what the characters say and what they 'live' in the fictive world of cinema, it is possible to shed light on the way in which European cultural pluralism takes shape as opposed to Islamic fundamentalism in *Um filme falado*.

During the performance of the Greek song, captain John is called by a sailor and has to leave his table, only to come back there at the end of the song with the shocking news that a bomb was put on the ship at the last stop in the Arabian port of Aden. It was exactly in Aden that the captain bought for Maria Joana the doll that, finally, costs her mother's life and her own. Interestingly enough, this is an Arabian doll wearing an Islamic veil. In Rosa Maria's story for Maria Joana, the Arabs are presented as a war-like people descending from Abraham's illegitimate son Ishmael. This theme is echoed in Helene's burst of indignation at the violence of the Arabs, who had spread Greek culture everywhere along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea only to eventually set to fire the original texts of inestimable value preserved in the library of Alexandria in the name of their religion. To Maria Joana's question around the origin and nature of war, Rosa Maria answers by comparing the root of conflict and violence to the childish unconditional attachment to a doll. Like children disputing over the possession of a beloved toy, men kill each other in the name of their most deeply-held convictions. The profundity of the metaphor is ironically interrupted by the child's question whether anyone would steal her doll, if she had one. Her mother lightly reassures her that this would never happen, which echoes in the captain's



comforting words in his basic Portuguese when giving the Arabian doll as a present to the little girl: ‘This doll is yours; no one will ever take it away from you’. When the alarm rings and all passengers abandon the ship, Maria Joana runs among the crowd all the way back to the cabin to take the doll, and Rosa Maria follows her. When they are finally ready to leave with the doll, it is too late.



The correspondence between the *told* metaphor of the doll and the *physical* doll’s role as a pseudo-kamikaze-fetish in the film can be understood in light of the way in which the film addresses the West-East relationship and, inextricably connected to this, today’s Islamic fundamentalism. In the States, it was commented on *Um filme falado* that ‘this is the only film . . . (which), in the aftermath of Sept. 11, has so directly addressed the war on liberal democracies’ (Dargis, 2004, online). To put it in a non-biased way, devoid of the rhetorical contamination of the neoliberalist discourse, this film deals with the confrontation between the West and the East over the past centuries up until the present age of fundamentalism and global terrorism. Maria Joana’s funny question ‘In which Middle Ages are we?’, asked in the commercialized mosque of St. Sophia, subtly suggests that, in spite of Rosa Maria’s academic presumption of knowledge, the medieval crusades are not merely a closed chapter of a history book. Nor is Napoleonic imperialism in the Orient, presented in a charming manner by actor

Luís Miguel Cintra (playing himself) in an intense encounter in Egypt (in the picture), simply a temporary apparition lost and gone in the desert sand. In the wind of history, the currents of European domination on the East have given way to the storm of American global imperialism, which excites and spreads the fire of Islamic fundamentalism. In the film, European multiculturalism is shaped in opposition to these unrelenting forces.

Turning upside down the power relationship between East and West, *Um filme falado* is ‘a far cry from the original image of a sea voyage in the Western tradition . . . (it is) a reversal, a mirror image of *The Odyssey* (Ulysses himself is mentioned early on in the film by Rosa Maria)’ (Eyny & Zubatov, 2004). The Homeric topos of the reconciliation voyage on Mediterranean waters through a series of diversions along the way is taken over in Maria Joana’s voyage with her mother to reunite with her absent father, in the course of which the several encounters on the way initiate her to the history of European civilization. Thus, Odysseus sailing westward among seductive temptresses to join his wife and son is replaced by daughter and mother going among the Portuguese actor’s and the American captain’s benign advances from west to east. Unlike for Odysseus, there are no gods protectors to help Maria Joana and Rosa Maria reach their destination, as the film constantly reminds the audience that all idols and gods have disappeared, like Athena’s statue. Unlike in Homer, the three goddesses Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena, the first explicitly identified with Francesca and the other two significantly paralleled with Delphine and Helene, respectively, are far from any mythical splendour and look rather like an embodiment of disillusionment. And unlike in the *Odyssey*, the voyage does not move from war

to peace, rather the other way round from intercultural dialogue to the clash of civilizations, in which a violent East wins over a corrupt West.

The reversed Homeric allegory of the film is enriched by the gender dimension. From the Homeric world to today's Europe, agency is no longer men's monopoly, as the protagonist of the film is not the man, husband and father, who is rather the static point towards which the dynamism of the voyage tends. *Um filme falado* is a women's story commenting on men's history in a men's world which, yet, has seen the emancipation of women. The men in the film are either disempowered by age like the fisherman of Marseilles, or emasculated like the captain, or just absent like Maria Joana's father. The real active characters are the women, with their critical spirit. The voyage opens with Maria Joana and Rosa Maria, followed by Delphine, Francesca, and Helene, after which the circle is dramatically closed with the disturbing effigy of oriental femininity: the doll. On the one hand, the dominance of the female presence in the film alludes to the feminine flexibility of European cultures, involved in a pluralism in which masculine aggression is rejected in favour of tolerance, dialogue, and the aspiration to harmonious peace. On the other hand, Europe is also presented as effeminate, feminized in contrast to the past (Greek) male vigour. In this respect, the protagonists are the Portuguese new-comers in the global community, who learn their lesson from the French enlightenment with which women's emancipation started, then from Italian nostalgia of traditional family surrendered to career, and finally from the Greek lamentation on the loss of the old values. Thus, the reversal of the Homeric parable with all its import of tradition is

complete. Where no men are there to take hold of the situation, it is no surprise that the West eventually succumbs to the East.

In this respect, *Um filme falado* is an artistic re-elaboration of what Bauman theorizes as liquid fear, specifically in the form of a ‘Titanic syndrome’ (2006, p. 18), as the glorious ship of European cultures sinks under the terrorist attack of Islamic fundamentalists in the filmic allegory. In this conceptual frame, the Titanic syndrome is the obsessive phobia of a catastrophe that might take place at any moment, hitting blindly and indiscriminately, randomly and with no rhyme or reason, and finding everyone unprepared and defenceless. In this sense, the film deals with the collective trauma of 9/11 by taking the Western audience on a cruise in the summer before the traumatic event, on a fictional voyage in which the spectators know already what would happen in reality only a few months after the characters’ conversations on the clash of civilizations. However, only in the final explosion can the spectators sublimate their collective trauma in the aesthetic élan and in the deep reflections stimulated by the film with its disturbing ending in mind. Their liquid fear of something uncontrollable finds an objective correlative in the sea where the filmic tragedy is consumed.

In light of the reversal of the West-East relationship and the therapeutic, or better cathartic character of the representation of fundamentalism, one important reflection suggested by the correspondence between the metaphor of faith as a doll for which the grown-ups fight, on the one hand, and the tragic death of the European child with her mother due to her possessive attachment to the Islamic doll received from the American captain, on the other hand, is that pluralist Europe is caught in between the two monist faith-fires of America and Islam. As

American-driven globalization corrupts Europe's cultural plurality and feeds the violence escalation of Islamic fundamentalism like an implacable wind, Islamic terrorism threatens the whole West with destruction like a fire that escapes any possibility of preventive prediction and control. Accordingly, European cultural pluralism is opposed to and, thus, defined by the monism of American neo-liberal imperialist globalization and Islamic religious terrorist fundamentalism. In contrast to the monist faith either in Liberalism or in Islamism, Europe presents a cultural pluralism which, still, risks to yield to the former and, thus, fall victim to the resentment of the latter, as with Maria Joana.

The highly symbolic correspondence of the script with the plot further hints at the idea of the inevitability of violence and the importance of coming to terms with something as omnipresent as conflict, which Gray articulates in the conclusion to his lucid analysis of modern terrorism (2003, p. 116). His insights into the omnipresence of faith and violence in the contingency of history constitute an ideal theoretical framework for the interpretation of the film's representation of fundamentalism. While Bauman points to the specificity of modern anxieties, Gray highlights the inherence of uncertainty in existence in all ages. To this regard, the former provided a powerful conceptual toolkit for dealing with the film's re-elaboration of historical facts in its representation of fundamentalism, whereas the latter offers a key to the Aristotelian trans-historicity of the doll-metaphor. The scope of his argumentation amounts to the necessity to accept and engage in intercultural confrontation as something inevitable. The theoretical facets of this claim can be deployed in and for the exploration of the trans-historical dimension of fundamentalism in *Um filme falado*.

The trans-historical scope of the Portuguese film is echoed in the transnational portrayal of conflict in *Auf der anderen Seite*. After her mother's murder in Germany, Gul/Ayten seeks refuge in this European country in order to escape from the Turkish government who wishes to jail her as a Kurdish activist. More transnational levels than one intersect here, as Gul fights for transnational human rights denied in Turkey and finds shelter as a transnational subject in Germany, where her mother works and dies. The character of the brave daughter embodies the fight against state terrorism in a westernized Muslim country, and her final imprisonment hints at the failure of EU countries which thus become tacit accomplices of overseas authoritarian governments demanding back any asylum seekers.

Her love story with Lotte takes on a tragic shape when the German girl follows her to Turkey and is murdered while trying to help Kurdish activists. As with her mother's murder in Germany, the failure of social and political organizations makes victims who inhabit marginal and liminal positions of dissidence and resistance. On all sides of this cross-border drama, marginal transnational subjects call for social change and renewal. Small wonder Gul is sceptical about European integration, in a wider socio-political context of marginalization and othering.

Far from any positive belief in progress, the many stories interlaced in the Portuguese film are interwoven with the unfolding of the plot, which is, in turn, connected to the doll-metaphor in the script, in a seamless web that conveys the idea of the trans-historicity of faith and violence. Beyond historical contingency and relativity, conflict is represented as an intrinsic feature of existence. Beyond

the age-old confrontation between the West and the East culminating in the present, the myths and wars juxtaposed in the film display the existential condition crystallized in the doll-metaphor that all men are like children ready to risk their lives for their little toys. Existence involves the construction of myths to believe in, like games to play, for the sake of which one either asserts oneself by overcoming the others or lets oneself be overcome by the others, either burning with or ending up burnt by the fire of one's faith. With the transposition of the doll from the spoken level of the script to the acted level of the plot in the film's ending, *Um filme falado* goes farther than only re-elaborate the collective trauma of the terrorist attacks of Islamic fundamentalists; following Aristotelian poetics, the catharsis is achieved in the sublimation of present evil into an aesthetic dimension where time is disclosed in its highly complex dialectics between past and present, and the trans-historical pattern of faith and violence is unveiled.

*Um filme falado* represents European cultural pluralism as the victim of the wind of American globalization and the fire of Islamic fundamentalism, and ultimately transcends history in the revelation of the inextricable bond of existence to the uncontrollable movement of faith and conflict:

(*Um filme falado* is) a kind of vision of Armageddon, a reversal of all of Western culture's most essential foundations. For though there may be many ways of depicting the End, only by alluding to the Beginning can an artist bring us the sense of bookends, of certain closure that we need to understand what has befallen us. If the beginning of creation "was the

Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, it is only fitting that the Word figures prominently in the End as well, even if the Word that remains seems wholly severed from its union with and incarnation as divinity, even if it is closer in spirit to Hamlet's despondent “words, words, words.” . . . (T)his picture . . . can talk, portraying speech itself, and certainly its excess, as a kind of decadent luxury. And it is likewise fitting, irony of ironies, that the final unforgettable image [...] should be a frozen expression of stunned silence. (Eyny & Zubatov, 2004)

In the waste land of rusted monuments and desolate ruins where Maria Joana wanders like an Odysseus turned on his head or an Alice in Terrorland, *Um filme falado* depicts the fall of Western civilization; or rather, the film *tells* the decadence of the West in the narration behind the deceptively dialogical form of the script. In the shipwreck of European cultural pluralism under the storm of American globalization and the fire of Islamic fundamentalism, the loud voices of the tourist guides off board and of the cheerful guests at the captain's table on board, all singing together the end of the West, are contrasted by the obstinate silence of the secret agents of globalization and terrorism: the media. Like the mute waves of the Mediterranean Sea towing the ship to its irredeemable doom through the camera-shots of the ship's bow repeatedly located between the several stops in the cruise, the media are the speechless channel of the forces hitting European multiculturalism, as the global market and terrorist organizations are highly dependent on media networks. In striking contrast to the historical setting of the film, no place is ever given to a TV/PC screen or a radio apparatus, as the



sea voyage becomes the opportunity to plug off from the media-crowded third millennium. However, albeit hardly audible, the media play a vital role in the historical phenomena represented in the film, as they are the very means by which globalization, terrorism, and multiculturalism unfold in the twenty-first century.

The argument here is *not* that the film indirectly, let alone directly, represents any aspect of the modern media, such as TV or the internet. The point is rather that the film reflects on the importance of *mediation* as a trans-historical pattern of existence and, in particular, in the historical configuration of European cultural pluralism opposed to American and Islamic monism. This can be seen in the loss of authenticity represented in the film and in the theatrical form of the film itself, which ultimately conveys the importance of intercultural mediation in European multiculturalism. The reflection on the intriguing relationship between the spoken and the unspoken of *Um filme falado* can highlight the role of mediation in the filmic representation of European cultural pluralism.

Maria Joana is the real protagonist of the sea voyage and the only child with the mission to handle to the future the past splendour of European civilization, which her death makes impossible (Eyny & Zubatov, 2004). Given primacy since the *prière d'insérer* at the film's beginning, in which she is introduced as the traveller accompanied by her mother, the girl's unique status as the only child is repeatedly underlined throughout the film in the presentation of the West as dying and childless, embodied by the many aging characters taking the floor, from the fisherman of Marseilles and the Orthodox priest of Athens to the disillusioned women-in-career and the bachelor captain. In the child's failed voyage, the fall of civilization is especially represented in the loss of authenticity

of culture, which can only be visited in a mediated form. The ancient Greek origins of Marseilles are revealed only by the meagre tale of a commemorative inscription, Pompeii's completeness can be admired only in the pictures of a book of postcard reconstructions, the Acropolis 'must have been beautiful' in Rosa Maria's words in front of the decrepit and badly kept monument, St. Sophia is only a museum conveying virtually the religious feelings of yore through the mediation of a paid story-teller: culture is not quite alive, as it can only be imagined in a mediated way rather than experienced as real.

Thus, *Um filme falado* represents the fall of civilization with the iconic symbols of childlessness and infanticide, and especially in the display of reality giving way to mediated artificiality. The loss of life and reality seems to be the underlying idea of the film, as its very form suggests starting from the metafiction-oriented title. A film of which the name is 'a film' associated with the activity of 'talking', this film constitutes an artistic medium which self-reflexively denounces its entity as a medium. The poetics to which it adheres include such metafictional devices as a documentary style, a meticulous frame composition with actors often in a frontal position instead of looking at each other, long takes and rather static camera, and a high degree of theatricality in the *mise-en-scène*, the use of the camera, and the acting style, as the actors often seem to just utter their character's lines without interpreting them (Johnson, 2003). These features may meet with the disapproval of some critics, who complain about the undeveloped characters and the unnaturally monotonous choice of edited material (Hoeij, 2005). However, the aim of this self-reflexivity on the real artificiality of the cinematic process is exactly to redirect the spectator's attention from the pictures

to the words spoken, the primary medium through which reality is filtered in the acts of expression and communication. On the one hand, the film's self-reflexive aesthetics, like its iconography of childlessness and artificiality, mirrors Europe's loss of life and reality. On the other hand, by acknowledging and emphasizing its own unreality *alias* fictiveness, it induces to reflect upon the linguistic, mediated, and ultimately constructed experience of existence. This interpretation of *Um filme falado* is in line with Johnson's<sup>193</sup> conclusion that:

Manoel de Oliveira questions the ontological status of such terms as "fiction" and "documentary" and challenges, through the pursuit of his own cinematic vision, some of the filmic and narrative conventions that have come to dominate mainstream commercial cinema. His films also challenge the spectator to think about, rather than passively accept, that which is shown on the screen.

This is the value of the theatricality involved in the self-reflexivity distinguishing Oliveira's oeuvre, with such fictional elements in the narrative as when a family of tourists stops by to stare at the rural people in *Acto da Primavera*, or as in films like *Amor de Perdição* and *Francisca*, in which even characters engaged in a dialogue often stand or sit looking at the camera, not at each other (*ibidem*). With such cinematic devices, the spectators' attention is guided from the images to the

---

<sup>193</sup> Randal Johnson is professor of Luso-Brazilian literature and culture at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author or editor of numerous books on Brazilian cinema, and he is currently engaged in research on Portuguese cinema, with a special focus on Manoel de Oliveira.

words, as Oliveira conceives cinema as indissolubly bound to theatre and literature.

In *Um filme falado*, too, a group of tourists stop to look with curiosity at the shots taken in Marseilles, and the conversations between mother and daughter both standing inexpressively in front of the camera on the ship are memorable. The film's theatricality reaches a high peak when Francesca confesses her regrets and love-sorrows. Her expressivity is accentuated like in a piece of theatre, and the red flowers deliberately located right in front of her on the table are a conventional symbol of the character's passion. Combined with the red of her dress, Francesca is, thus, represented as in a fire of feelings. So much theatrical care channels the attention of the audience to her words, in which she describes love as a tyrant and herself as his prisoner. The literary importance of this metaphor can be traced back long before Shakespeare's sonnets to the very first sonnets ever composed, at the court of Frederick II in Sicily and, later, by the poets of the Dolce Stil Novo in Tuscany, including Dante. To this regard, the film's aesthetics tends to display its indebtedness and dedication to literature. Finally, the film's theatricality finds direct expression in the melodramatic performance of the Greek actress and, ultimately, in the overarching allegory of the anti-Homeric voyage. In this sense, *Um filme falado* owes much inspiration to the artistic ideal set by the Greek tragedy, with a simple and highly symbolic scenery and strong emphasis on the text played.

It is exactly in its iconography of infanticide/artificiality and in its literature-oriented cinematic aesthetics of theatricality that *Um filme falado* can be best understood as an allegorical reversal of the Odyssey. The authenticity and

vitality lost are those of the Greek classical world from which Europe was born and turned away by the artificial wind of American-led globalization. In this respect, the captain can be seen as the reversed image of Ulysses' mermaids, mentioned early on in the film. While Odysseus had the Greek strength to resist this occult and fatal force, Maria Joana cedes to the mermaid-like temptation of American global imperialism and accepts the doll from the captain, which compromises the success of her voyage by exposing the European child to the furious fire of Islamic fundamentalism. This Greek tragedy of lethal exile from Greek culture has a choral message, like in the Greek theatre, which is condensed in the metaphor of the doll and in the symbolism of the final Greek song. This filmic anti-Odyssey narrates eloquently the eternal recurrence of faith and conflict against the ever-changing scenery of existence, and in particular against the decadent scenery of European cultural pluralism ravaged by American globalization and Islamic fundamentalism.

The modality employed to represent artistically this political issue consists of the use of cinematic technology oriented to theatre and literature. From the title to the camera-shots and the *mise-en-scène*, the film draws the spectators' attention to its real artificiality as a medium and to the words of the script played by the actors. Thus, the invisible centre of the film is mediation itself, as the process whereby reality is shaped by the means used to express it, which are the many stories in the film's dialogues and the languages in which they are told. Instead of representing the modern media on which European cultural pluralism and American/Islamic monism rely, the film explores with its theatrical poetics the dimension of (linguistic) mediation as a condition of existence that plays an

important role also in European cultural pluralism, represented in the intercultural and multilingual dialogue of the three European disenchanting goddesses.

While the film's iconography of artificiality highlights the forgetfulness of Greek culture that results in the fall of Europe in the clash between American-dominated globalization and Islamic fundamentalism, the film's aesthetics of theatricality puts to the fore the stories told in the characters' conversations. Thus, European cultural pluralism is represented as characterized by intercultural mediation in the harmonious multilingual conversations. In this way, *Um filme falado* realizes film's potential as a politics-engaged technological manifestation of culture somewhere between media and the arts. It is a work of art and, simultaneously, a modern medium employing technology in a critical way to engage in a political discussion. And it does so without taking sides to propose some new version of the true and good; rather, it hints at the relativity of existence, in the flux of which everything changes and cultures rise and fall.

With its theatricality and with its iconography of childlessness and artificiality, *Um filme falado* represents mediation as a fascinating aspect of European multiculturalism. In an Aristotelian way, such an artistic representation of this particular historical phenomenon points to the general, trans-historical motif of the construction of reality through (linguistic) media and the construction of identity in opposition to diversity. The film's theatricality and the all-pervasiveness of mediation stimulate reflection on how existence always involves mediation, as it is in mediation that reality is experienced. Already long before cinematic technology, language provides the frame in which things exist for the very fact of having been assigned a name. And it is by telling each other stories, in

the process of communication, that it is possible to find a meaning in existence. As with European cultural pluralism having a meaning in opposition to American global imperialism and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, identity is always created in the discovery of differences, in a dialectical movement between the Self and the Others. In this process of identity-building in contrast to different entities, *Um filme falado* represents language and, in general, mediation as the silent, or rather talking, waves on which existence travels acquiring again and again new meanings.

As always new meanings succeed one another in the voyage of existence, the shipwreck of European multiculturalism in *Um filme falado* leaves the audience ample room for personal reflection, rather than making any absolute statement on the fate and duty of Europe. The speechless face of the captain after so many words in the final shot expresses the contingency and arbitrariness of history, as the ship of European cultural pluralism is dragged by the American wind of globalization to the excited fire of Islamic fundamentalism and sinks in the trans-historical sea of mediation, always animated by the wind of change and lightened at night by the fire of conflict in the cyclical movement of existence. This interpretation adds complexity to the reading of the film as an anti-Odyssey on the fall of the West by analysing the film's representation of European cultural pluralism succumbing to American global imperialism and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in the symbolism of the European child dying for the Arab doll received from the American captain, like an Odysseus deprived of its Greek strength and fallen victim to the mermaids.

Homer's Mediterranean sea has, thus, become rather the Mediation sea of existence, where European cultural pluralism is represented either as the negation of American global imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, or as the harmonious multilingual mediation between the three European disenchanted goddesses. This interpretation also finds a deeper meaning of the filmic anti-Odyssey; the voyage does not only deal with the fall of the West, but rather sketches, along the lines of Aristotelian poetics, the trans-historical existential motifs of change, conflict, and mediation beyond the socio-political particularity of European cultural pluralism against the background of the confrontation between American global imperialism and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. This is achieved with a deployment of cinematic technology that involves a high degree of theatricality, with a marked orientation towards literature. In this sophisticated and sober way, *Um filme falado* fulfils its potential of film as a politics-engaged technological manifestation of culture somewhere in between media and art creativity. As in *Auf der anderen Seite*, the divide between the West and the Muslim world is criticized and reframed.

### *Blending Memories*

The remembrances of national belonging and transnational awareness are blended through the imagery of water and waves in the novels *Im Krebsgang* and *Oceano mare*. While the novel in German conveys this blend of dissonant memories



through a style marked by succinct and deliberately bitter dryness and concision, the Italian and the English novel (*Black Dogs*) provide elaborate lyrical articulations of poetical prose which will be dealt with in most of the following comparative analysis. Comparing these three works allows for an overview on the metousiastic relativist revaluation of colonialist nationalism within Europe and in the African continent through postmodern literary devices.

The way in which trauma and nostalgia are woven together comes to the foreground through a disgusting imagery in the novel *Im Krebsgang* by Günter Grass:

Die Geschichte, genauer, die von uns angerührte Geschichte ist ein verstopftes Klo. Wir spülen und spülen, die Scheiße kommt dennoch hoch. [...] Wir haben ja Wörter für den Umgang mit der Vergangenheit dienstbar gemacht: sie soll gesühnt, bewältigt werden, an ihr sich abzumühen heißt Trauerarbeit leisten.<sup>194</sup> (116)

Diarrhoea and decomposition feature as disgusting icons of bodily waste left from the past for the mind to clean over and again through memory, as in an eternal infernal torture. What is also meta-fictively recalled and reminded here is the role played by words in this doomed hygienic practice of remembering. The novel shows that collective and personal remembrances of National Socialism are

---

<sup>194</sup> History, or rather, the history touched upon by us is a clogged toilet. We flush more and more, yet ever more shit comes up. We have made words useful to deal with the past: it should be atoned, coped with; taking pains with it means grieving.

framed by means of a metaphor of moral hygiene. The closing note on mourning hints also at this past experience as a trauma to cope with.

This is blurred with the nostalgic voice of the old woman Tulia who passes on to her teenage grandson, Konny, her happy memories from that time. The shock, however, surfaces again, as he murders his chat-mate Wolfgang who takes the side of the Jewish victims in a breath-taking role-play. This story is narrated from the middle generational position of the neo-Nazi teenager's father, the journalist Paul Pokriefke whose report performs the ultimate act of remembrance through words that weave together these dissonant memories and doings. In turn, this points to the author's creative act whereby this novel stores intersecting narratives that show the delicate interplay between memory and practice. The disgusting images of defecation and decomposition serve also the function to dismember and remember the – in the present, stench-ridden and rotting – ideological discourse of Aryan health as opposed to inferior racial dirt and illness.

In his trial, the neo-Nazi teenager does not hesitate to perpetuate the discourse wherein Jews in Nazi Germany are called 'Fremdkörper' ('alien bodies', p. 196), with a biological term referring to viruses and parasites. His story intersects with his grandmother's memories also about a Jewish German young man who murdered a state officer to protest against anti-Semitism. The perpetrator of this sacrilege is called 'ein hoffnungsloser Fall' ('a hopeless case', p. 15) exactly due to his chronically ill condition, which matches Aryan stereotypes of sickly Jews. The same phrase describes the teenager's symbolic sacrificial victim (p. 198), who protests against the recrudescence of racism in present Germany. The teenage murderer commits his crime with the aim to take

revenge on the murder of an Aryan officer, which occurred when his grandmother was enjoying a cruise on the North Sea offered to Germans in those years. Her grandson symbolically sacrifices a sacrilegious enemy of Aryan values in an extreme act inspired by the ideal of social cleanliness and health.

Disgust, thus, works in two distinct ways. Its Aryan understanding intersects with the present need to metaphorically clean the guilt of racism away from national memory. These divergent narratives are voiced from the inextricably intertwined perspectives of the nostalgic grandmother, the teenage murderer, and his father (as well as her son), who provides a unitary, yet fragmented account of these stories in a distanced and estranged narration. His shock at the events recounted stresses the painful and traumatic dimension of the remembrance enacted through the practice of writing on these sensitive issues from an ever-present past in an increasingly Islamophobic and disturbingly anti-Semitic early twenty-first century.

The relativist inspiration of the transiency of being is rendered with the overarching metaphor of the sea oscillation which is stressed even in the very title of *Oceano mare* by Alessandro Baricco, which hints at colonialism in Africa and defies all ethnic borders. The novel tells the story of a shipwreck's survivor, Thomas/Adams, who murders Ann Deveria, the woman loved by the doctor André Savigny who had killed Thomas' partner on the survivors' raft for passengers to feed on her flesh. The wreckage is the famous incident of the Napoleonic Navy's frigate *Méduse* off the shores of Mauritania. Through this engagement with the cultural memory of European imperialism and its

discontents, Baricco challenges essentialist understandings of identity and celebrates the relativism of experience and story-telling.

Counterpointing the main theme of tidal inspiration, the unsettling relativist intuition of the imagination of individual subjectivity is conveyed through the horror-evoking image of the shipwreck. The relativist conception of being as transient, condensed in the overarching image of the sea tide, resonates in the mysterious disease of the baron's daughter, Elisewin, and in the precariousness of the inn constituting the novel's main setting of Thomas and Ann's tragic encounter. The ensuing fatalist overcoming of the transiency of being is symbolically achieved in the artistic sublimation of the creative imagination of the writer himself, waiting in the seventh and last inhabited room of the inn in the final part of the novel with a masterly display of irony at the convergence of postmodernism and European relativism. This meta-artistic thread running from the incipit to the ending and the different perspectives converging in the inn echo the relativist conception of subjectivity condensed in the metaphor of the fatal shipwreck. Hence, the transiency of being, the horror-evoking discovery of the imaginary character of authorial subjectivity, the mysterious occult, the precariousness of spatio-temporal orientation, meta-literarily achieved ontological doubt, and the convergence of different perspectives are salient themes, as will now be extensively discussed, as befits this highly lyrical work of poetical prose. These images develop on the novel's metaphor of the sea.

In the novel, Almayer Inn hosts seven guests gravitating around the sea. Plasson and Bartleboom intend, respectively, to paint the sea and to write an encyclopaedic entry on the limits of the sea, to which aim they yearn for the

knowledge of the beginning and of the ending of the sea. Madame Ann Deveria and Lady Elisewin, accompanied by the writer of prayers Father Pluche, look for a remedy to their ills in the sea, as the former is a slave to her desires and the latter suffers from a mysterious disease amounting to an obsessive anxiety vis-à-vis the infinite unknown possibilities of existence inherent in the transiency of being. Thomas, who changes his name to Adams, waits to kill Ann Deveria to take revenge on her lover, André Savigny, who murdered his beloved one in the extreme situation of the shipwreck. As their lot is sealed, the writer who wanted to say the sea finally leaves the last inhabited room, while the inn dissolves behind him. Underscored with the dissolution of the inn and with the disease of the noble lady, caducity is symbolized by the central image of the sea tide. The literary text provides an extended metaphor of the relativist inspiration of the transiency of being, counterpointed by the image of the shipwreck which represents the intuition of the imagination of subjectivity running through the dwellers of the inn and, in particular, the artistic sublimation of the writer.

The sea is the overarching metaphor of *Oceano mare*, as is evident from the title and from the very first chapter, where the sea as the image of truth is presented, challenged, and, ultimately, overcome. The apparent perfection and exactitude of the sea landscape is associated from the incipit of the novel to the idea of 'verità' (truth), emphasised in the original text. The idea of truth evoked by the sea, however, is suspended by the presence of the observer striving to achieve a representation of truth, suggested through the image of the painter, Plasson, struggling to paint the sea. The man, and actually Man:

(è) come una sentinella – questo *bisogna* capirlo – ... a difendere quella porzione di mondo dall'invasione silenziosa della perfezione, piccola incrinatura che sgretola quella spettacolare scenografia dell'essere. ...

(B)asta il barlume di un uomo a ferire il riposo di ciò che sarebbe a un attimo dal diventare *verità* e invece immediatamente torna ad essere attesa e domanda, per il semplice e infinito potere di quell'uomo che è feritoia e spiraglio, porta piccola da cui rientrano storie a fiumi e l'immane repertorio di ciò che *potrebbe* essere, squarcio infinito, ferita meravigliosa, sentiero di passi a migliaia dove nulla più potrà essere vero [...].<sup>195</sup> (10)

Remarkably, the words emphasised in the original text, '*bisogna*', '*verità*', and '*potrebbe*', succeed one another in a sequence which conveys the inexorable transit from necessity and importance all the way to mere possibility. By virtue of his being a particular observer, thus endowed with the oxymoronically 'semplice e infinito' power of observation, man deploys the force of imagining 'storie a fiumi' which, unfolding in a plurality of possible interpretations, question the monolithic truth of being as a whole, in contrast to the partial being of the individual observer, characterised as a 'porta piccola'. Emphasized with the alliteration, the idea of door, *porta*, is etymologically related to the Sanskrit word for *bearing*, *bhara*, present in the Greek word *metaphor* and marked in the *p-r* and *f-r* consonant combinations in neo-Latin languages, as well as in the *b-r* consonant

---

<sup>195</sup> 'like a guardian – it is necessary to understand this – [...] The shadow of a man suffices to hurt the quietness of that which would be at one step from becoming truth, and instead immediately turns again into waiting and questioning, by virtue of the simple and endless power held by that man, who is a slit and a crack, a small door through which myriads of stories overflow, along with the huge repertory of that which might be, an endless split, a wonderful wound, a path of thousands of steps where nothing can ever be true anymore.'

combination in Germanic languages. Both the Italian words *porta* and *forza* and their Sanskrit etymological relatives *bhara* and *bala* are very similar, as the concept of bearing implies exactly the use of force. The image of an open door, then, is particularly emblematic for the power of imagination from which infinite possible particular stories overflow, in contrast to the static majesty of the whole of being. This is rendered in the image of the sea landscape spoilt by the presence of the artist, where the problem of the dichotomy between nature and culture finds expression. Such an apparently inimical opposition is condensed in the more or less explicit metaphorical antithetical terms of the invader and the warden, the superb scenery and the flaw, rest in the shadow and bright light, static truth and dynamic questioning, whole and hole, body and wound, forest and path.

The idea of necessary and stable truth represented by the sea is ultimately overcome in the ending of the chapter with the image of the painter who, following the cycle of the sea tide, goes to the beach in the hours of light and leaves only at dusk, namely when darkness makes the landscape indistinguishable, and, hence, the ideal of perfect and exact truth cannot possibly find realisation. The absolute can only give way to the puzzling relative. The association of transiency to the image of the tide is intertextually related to *Bhagavad Gîtâ*, VIII, 19, which is Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's obvious point of reference: 'all this assemblage of beings, after being born more and more times [...] extinguishes itself at nightfall, and with the coming of the day, even if unwillingly, it is born again', where always the same absolute force of being as a whole manifests itself in ever different particular relative forms. The Latin noun *veritas* bears telling etymological relationships to the nouns *vir/vis/virtus* (man/force/virtue), *voluntas*

(will), and *valitus* (valid), as well as to the Greek *elpis* (hope) and several Sanskrit nouns related to *bala* (force), all of which can be recognised in Germanic versions characterised by the *w-l* and *w-r* consonant combinations. This ideal of absoluteness yields to relativity in *Oceano mare*. Man, embodied by the first character, Plasson, is soon posited at the same level as woman, in the character of Ann, who walks on the beach where the artist is painting. Both man and woman deploy their force and value in no mastery of any absolute truth hidden in the sea, but rather in the ephemeral stories which, wave-like, flow from their hope and will to come to terms with the immensity of the sea, i.e. the ‘scenery of being’, either in artistic representation or, simply, in love.

The idea of absolute truth associated with the sea is questioned more radically through the further unfurling of the plot. In fact, the rivalry between absolute and relative, which is posited in the first chapter with the images of the sea and the wo/man, soon becomes intrinsic to the ever more ambiguous image of the first dichotomous term, that is, the sea itself. This is endemic in the story of Bartleboom. While Plasson is an artistic observer, Bartleboom aspires to a scientific representation of the sea. When he arrives at Almayer Inn, he finds in his room the mysterious child Dood, ever contemplating the sea. Bartleboom’s scientific disenchantment results in his question to the child regarding the value of his monotonous activity, considering that the sea is ‘sempre uguale’ (‘always the same’, p. 20). Interestingly, the child’s oracle-like arcane response culminates in the nonchalantly straightforward remark that Bartleboom is nice and, perhaps, after his stay in the inn, he will be less of an idiot. This is only the start of the



radical questioning of the sea's apparently absolute, monolithic, monotonous truth in the novel, which continues when Bartleboom himself contemplates the sea:

Bartleboom guardava.

Nel cerchio imperfetto del suo universo ottico la perfezione di quel moto oscillatorio formulava promesse che l'irripetibile unicità di ogni singola onda condannava a non esser mantenute. Non c'era verso di fermare quel continuo avvicinarsi di creazione e distruzione. I suoi occhi cercavano la verità descrivibile e regolamentata di un'immagine certa e completa: e finivano, invece, per correre dietro alla mobile indeterminazione di quell'andirivieni che qualsiasi sguardo scientifico cullava e derideva. (pp. 31-32)<sup>196</sup>

While its undulation evokes visual perfection, every 'onda', each and every wave of the sea is different from all others. Undulation is perfect and absolute only in the inextricable mutual relations of the 'ond(e)', the waves, which are actually characterised by 'indeterminazione' and relativity in their 'andirivieni' of creation and destruction. The wave passes and gives way to other waves, irredeemably different from the wave passed (away); this image represents birth and death as inextricably interrelated, as in the fascinating and obscure character of Dood, a child whose name is the Dutch word for both death and dead. In the waves' cradle

---

<sup>196</sup> 'Bartleboom was staring. In the imperfect circle of his visual universe, the perfection of that swinging was uttering promises doomed to be broken by the fleeting shapes of each single wave. There was no way to stop that ceaseless alternation of creation and destruction. His eyebulbs were searching for the neatly cut and disciplined truth of a picture both still and whole – and yet would end up chasing the shifting shapelessness of that swinging, which lulled and mocked any and all kinds of scientific gaze.'

(*culla*) scientific observation is no more than a baby, with a derisory (*derisorio*) paradox. The ‘mare immenso [...] infinito [...] immane’ [boundless, endless, ruthless sea] (33) consists of a ‘ciclica esplosione di onde’ [ringlike outburst of waves] (39) which it is impossible to reduce to the absolute perfection of scientific measurement, as will be discussed when dealing with the occult disease of the novel. The novel presents, from the first chapter, the sea as the ‘scenery of being’ relative to the perspective of the parts of being, that is, individual observers. The waves themselves, eventually, represent the plurality of different perspectives to which their ontological whole, that is, the sea itself, is relative.

The suggestion is that individual observers, identified as cultural subjects in the dichotomous opposition with the whole of nature, actually participate, that is, are constituent parts of, the whole of being observed, as with the waves of the sea. Thus, the dichotomy of nature and culture collapses. As with *Bartleboom*, every individual observer disposes on their own *imperfect* perspective (‘cerchio imperfetto’). In this respect, observers are as partial as waves, each different from each other. Only in the plurality of possibilities opened up by the parts’ inextricable mutual relations does the whole of being take form and deploy its force. The absoluteness of the natural force of being resides in the very relativity of the cultural forms in which it inexorably manifests itself, as with the monotonous and perfect sameness of the sea in the polyphonic and uncanny otherness of the waves.

The dichotomy of absolute sea and relative wo/man is challenged with the image of the sea as ambiguously absolute in its whole and, yet, relative in its parts, that is, the waves, which suggests that, symmetrically, wo/man is relative in

its particular perspective and, yet, absolute in its participation in and entity as a manifestation of the whole of being. Thus, the literary image of the undulating sea represents artistically the interconnectivity, which is both harmony and conflict, of relative perspective and absolute being inherent in existence, as implied in the very (dis)association of *mare* and *oceanico*. When this indissoluble bond of relative and absolute results in the existential angst of conflict, the remedy consists in the revaluation of conflict as, actually, the experience of a mystic harmony. In the metaphorical terms of the novel, when the relativity of sea undulation seems to threaten the absolute whole of being as if the two were in conflict with each other, wo/man can only face the waves and discover that, actually, their endless conflict amounts to the parts' participation in and manifestation of the harmonious whole of being. The remedy to the angst of the wave-like transiency and insecurity inherent in existence, which could be named thessalophobia in this context, is nothing other than coming to terms with existential relativity, that is, the sea itself:

*Dentro il mare. C'era da non crederlo. L'appetato e putrido mare,  
ricettacolo di orrori, e antropofago mostro abissale – antico e pagano – da  
sempre temuto e adesso, d'improvviso  
ti invitano, come a una passeggiata, ti ordinano, perché è una  
cura, ti spingono con implacabile cortesia*

*dentro il mare.*<sup>197</sup> (42)

---

<sup>197</sup> 'Into the sea. It was hard to believe. The rotten and stench-ridden sea, reservoir of horrors, and flesh-eating monster of the abyss – olden and pagan – always frightful, yet now, suddenly, they call you, like for a walk, they order you, for it is the cure, they push you with ruthless kindness... into the sea.'

Underscored with the postmodern heterodox versification of prose creating effects of semantic suspension and narrative suspense, the ambiguity inherent in the sea is conveyed in the opposing images of horror and healing. As the sea is the ‘receptacle’ of the very horrors constellating the angst ensued from the condition of uncertainty and transiency in existential relativity, it is only in its own polyphony of particular and distinct waves that a remedy to existential angst can be found through the discovery of the reassuring monotony in which all distinctions dissolve.

The vision of the sea as healing challenges the perception of the sea as the ultimate occult evil. This archaic fear runs through the attributes of ‘casa del demonio’ [house of the devil] (41), ‘mostro’ [monster] (42), ‘nudità’ [nakedness] (43), ‘grande intestino acquatico’ [huge water gut] (44), ‘senza spiegazioni’ [unsound] (46), ‘lontano ... terribile, esageratamente bello, terribilmente forte – disumano e nemico – meraviglioso [...] colori diversi, odori mai sentiti, suoni sconosciuti – [...] l’altro mondo’ [remote, terrible, overly stunning, terribly mighty – cruel and adverse – awe-inspiring ... manifold hues, scents never smelled, sounds unknown] (50), associated with the anecdote of the ‘(b)agno d’onda’ [wave-bath] (45), that is, the experimental medical treatment of the mentally ill in the sea, leading to death. Such is the thessalophobia tormenting Elisewin’s father, the baron of Carewall, whose name resounds with associations from the most direct one to protective walls, to the remotest ones to the Latin *cura* (worry) and, again, the Sanskrit *bala* (force), and hints at the etymology of the word *culture*, related to the Sanskrit utterances indicating a *cell*, home, shelter from the unknown, where force and resources are *collected*, food is gathered,

prayers and sacrifices are offered to gain the forces to overcome the *occult*. In this respect, the sea represents the unknown and wild force of nature. With the stories flowing from an inn ‘*cullata*’ [lulled] (91, emphasis added) by the sea, as will be apparent in the discussion on *Almayer Inn* itself, the novel criticises creatively the dichotomies of culture and nature, good and evil, cult and occult.

The ancestral picture of the sea as a voracious monster of never predictable relativity, already questioned with the identification of existential healing exactly in the unsettling transiency associated with the sea, is nuanced with the exploration of the irresistibly alluring and inescapably all-encompassing mystic harmony of the relative and the absolute in the sea:

[...] Il mare cancella, di notte. [...] Sarebbe un rifugio perfetto. Invisibili a qualsiasi nemico. Sospesi. Bianchi [...]. Impercettibili anche a se stessi. Ma c'è qualcosa che incrina questo purgatorio. Ed è qualcosa da cui non puoi scappare. Il mare. Il mare incanta, il mare uccide, commuove, spaventa, fa anche ridere alle volte, sparisce, ogni tanto, si traveste da lago, oppure costruisce tempeste, divora navi, regala ricchezze, non dà risposte, è saggio, è dolce, è potente, è imprevedibile. Ma soprattutto: il mare *chiama*. [...] Non fa altro, in fondo, che questo: *chiamare*. Non smette mai, ti entra dentro, ce l'hai addosso, è te che vuole. Puoi anche far finta di niente, ma non serve. Continuerà a chiamarti. Questo mare che vedi e tutti gli altri che non vedrai, ma che ci saranno, sempre, in agguato, pazienti, un passo oltre la tua vita. Instancabilmente, li sentirai chiamare. Succede in questo purgatorio di sabbia. Succederebbe in qualsiasi paradiso, e in

qualsiasi inferno. Senza spiegare nulla, senza dirti dove, ci sarà sempre un mare, che ti chiamerà.<sup>198</sup> (79-80)

With this intertextual adaptation of the Homeric myth of the sirens' irresistible singing and hallucinations, the image of the sea as the threat to order and safety par excellence is contrasted with a re-conceptualisation of the sea as the compelling allegorical portrait of the meta-moral dimension inherent in the transiency of being, where good and evil are no more than ever-changing illusions woven together in the same watery fabric. In fact, the sea *alias* being is beyond the Dantean order of 'inferno', 'purgatorio', and 'paradiso', as its powers appear to be both benign and malign. On the one hand, the sea gives shelter, magic, laughter, wealth, wisdom, and sweetness. On the other, it is murderous, frightening, and ultimately unpredictable.

In a compellingly cyclical *Ringstruktur* exhausting the *Spannung* ensued from the questioning of absolute truth already on the first page, the motif of truth returns exactly inside the ambiguously *sacer* curse and blessing of the sea. While the truth of the incipit, in front of the sea, is nothing more than the vain illusion of absoluteness blown away by the flow of possibilities embodied by wo/man, inside

---

<sup>198</sup> 'The sea is erosive, at night. It could have been a perfect shelter. Unseen to all foes. Suspended. White. Hidden even from oneself. But there is something that cracks this purgatory. And it is something you can never leave behind. The sea. The sea enchants, murders, brings to tears, frightens, sometimes even makes you laugh, gets lost, sometimes, shifts to the shape of a lake, or conjures storms, feeds on ships, sends out precious gifts, makes no answer, wise it is, and sweet, and strong, and unforeseeable. Yet above all this – the sea *calls*. All it does is this, indeed – *call*. It never stops, it gets inside you, you have it on you, it is you it longs for. You can turn a blind eye on it, which will not help. It will keep calling you. This sea which you can see and all other seas out of your sight, always there, patiently lurking, one small step away from your life. Indefatigably, you will hear them call. It happens in this sand purgatory. It would happen in any heaven or hell. Answering no riddles, announcing no venue, there will always be a sea calling your name.'

the sea it is relative truth which is disclosed, exactly in the centre of the literary text:

Dovessi vivere ancora mille anni, [...] destino sarebbe il nome di questo oceano mare, infinito e bello. Non mi sbagliavo, là sulla riva, in quegli inverni, a pensare che qui era la verità. Ci ho messo anni a scendere in fondo al ventre del mare: ma quel che cercavo, l'ho trovato. Le cose vere. Perfino quella, di tutte, più insopportabilmente e atrocemente vera. È uno specchio, questo mare. Qui, nel suo ventre, ho visto me stesso. Ho visto davvero.<sup>199</sup> (120)

After the experience of the horrors of the shipwreck, the sea becomes the symbolic 'mirror' of relative truth, or actually of non-truth. In its overcoming of good and evil, which will be discussed when focusing on the shipwreck, the sea conveys the fatalistic awareness ('destino') of the ironically imaginary entity of all truths. Even in the utterly unspeakable horrors of the shipwreck, '(n)on ci sono colpevoli e innocenti, condannati e salvati. C'è solo il mare' [there is no culprit and no innocent, condemned or rescued. Only the sea] (108). What is good and what is evil is sanctioned with the force of collective imagination in cultural forms which, however, partake in and manifest the natural force of transiency, beyond good and evil, God and the devil. All is one in the satirically paradoxical liturgy whose divinity is the relativity of existence represented by the sea (109), to *Whom*

---

<sup>199</sup> 'Were I to live some hundred more years, fate would the name of this ocean sea, endless and gorgeous. I was not mistaken, there on the shore, during those winters, thinking that here lies the truth. I took years to reach the womb of the sea – yet I have found what I was after. True things. Even the most unbearably and mercilessly true thing of all. A mirror is what this sea is. Here in its womb I have seen myself. I have seen at last.'

(‘SANTO ... LUI ... l’Oceano Mare’ [holy... Him... Ocean Sea]) hymns are raised while contemplating the splendour of horror and the horror of glory (‘GLORIA’).

The existential chance for wo/man after the experience inside the sea, as will be evident in the discussion on meta-literature and ontological doubt, is the fatalistic acceptance of the relative condition of observation and representation, where it is impossible to find any one absolute truth about being, but it is important to manifest being, and to participate in the (natural) force of being, by observing and representing it in the revaluation of its (cultural) forms:

Dire il mare. Perché è quello che ci resta. Perché davanti a lui, noi senza croci, senza vecchi, senza magia, dobbiamo pur avere un’arma, qualcosa, per non morire in silenzio, e basta.<sup>200</sup> (225)

In the creative and critical flow of possible stories and interpretations it is possible to rediscover the meaning and value of participating in the undulating sea of being, where the absolute ideals condensed in the trinity of religious rituals and cults (‘croci’), fathers and fatherland *alias* socio-political tribe (‘vecchi’), and all-mightily miraculous medicine, high art, science or technology (‘magia’) are blown away by the natural force of being, and are re-valued in its cultural forms of existential relativity. This remedy, remediation, and revaluation is possible in creative and critical sublimation, that is, the hybridisation and the overcoming of conventions.

---

<sup>200</sup> ‘Saying the sea. For this is what we are left with. For when faced with him, our army with no crosses, no wisemen, no magic, still has to hold a weapon, something, so as not to die making no sound, is all.’



The cultural conventions sanctioning the limits of good and evil are socially constructed in order to overcome the natural limits related to the transiency of being, without ever succeeding in controlling everything. The crystallisation of the cultural, conventional limits of good and evil is a fossilisation whose resulting dogmas are swept away by the very possibility of always alternative accounts, *Weltanschauungen*, stories, as suggested from the incipit of the novel. Conversely, their sublimation in creativity and criticism embraces fatalistically the transiency of being, the relativity of existence, the waves of the sea, as evident in the finale of the literary text. In fact, storytelling involves the fatalistic acceptance of the eternal recurrence of the force of being in always the same situation, where subjects are imaginatively created in relation to others, in a succession of ever different forms, as in the waves of the sea. On the contrary, organised justice, or revenge, and the systematic in/exclusion, sanctioned in the absolutisms of religion, science, and high art, attempt in vain to stop the destructive and creative flow of being. In contrast to absolutist ‘croci, ... vecchi, ... magia’ and a nihilist ‘silenzio, e basta’, a relativist ‘dire’ [uttering] is the sublime remedy of the creative and critical revaluation of the cultural waves of the natural sea, as will be discussed with respect to the parables of the characters encountering in the text. In the metaphor of the sea, the dichotomous terms of nature and culture disappear in the relativist conception of being as the eternal recurrence of the same natural force of transiency in always different cultural forms, which are just as naturally transient as natural transiency is itself culturally manifest. As the tragic fate of natural force as a whole is that it exists as particular cultural forms, or *doors* as in the initial metaphor, and vice versa, as with the sea

and the waves, the act of observation and representation follows the tragic hubris to move over and beyond the limits of what is either whole, force and nature, or part (as a door, *porta*), form and culture, in the holistic creative and critical sublimation of existential relativity.

[...] la verità si concede solo all'orrore, e [...] per vederla abbiamo dovuto distruggerci l'un l'altro [...] che verità è mai questa, che puzza di cadavere, e cresce nel sangue, si nutre di dolore, e vive dove l'uomo si umilia, e trionfa dove l'uomo marcisce? Là sulla riva [...] io immaginavo una verità che era quiete, era grembo, era sollievo, e clemenza, e dolcezza [...] Ma qui, nel ventre del mare, ho visto la verità fare il suo nido, meticolosa e perfetta: e quel che ho visto è un uccello rapace, magnifico in volo, e feroce. [...] Non era questo che sognavo [...] quando sognavo questo.<sup>201</sup> (120-121)

The chiasmic formula '(n)on ... questo ... sognavo ... quando sognavo questo' conveys the horror disclosed inside the sea, where truth, imagined on the shore as a sweet maternal womb, appears as a blood-thirsty hunter. This striking contrast marks the distinction between the perspectives *before*, *inside*, and *after* the sea (119), presented with the topical rhetorical digression of a sea-survivor's tale. Yet, in the *womb* ('grembo') of the sea, right in the central part of *Oceano mare*, one

---

<sup>201</sup> '[...] truth gives herself only to horror, and [...] in order to see her we had to destroy one another [...] what truth can this be, smelling like corpses, and growing in blood, feeding with sorrow, and living where man is humiliated, and triumphing where man putrefies? There on the shore [...] I used to imagine a truth which was quietness, was womb, was relief, and mercy, and sweetness [...] But here, in the belly of the sea, I saw truth making her nest, so meticulous and perfect: and what I saw is a bird of prey, flying grandly, and fierce. [...] This is not what I was dreaming [...] when I was dreaming this.'

more difference comes to the fore regarding the perspective *after* the sea, as evident from the succession of the two distinct narrations by Savigny and Thomas. While Savigny's perspective can be defined as *over and beyond* the sea once attention is paid to the relations with the novel's overarching metaphor, Thomas' can be distinguished as *under and behind* the sea.

The former's is a relativist viewpoint, whereas the latter's is an *inconsolable* (122) nihilism, as will be discussed when dealing specifically with the characters. The two *postmarine* alias postmodern perspectives represent the possibilities available to those who survive the shipwreck, that is, the horror of the apocalypse where the transience of the sea reveals the imaginary character of absolute truth. This apocalyptic horror of absolute g(o)d's death is set against the Conradian scenario of colonialism (113), and finds expression in such 'spettacolo assurdo' [meaningless display] (105) as the story of young Léon dying suddenly assailed by the horror of the situation, in particular of the loss of his mother, and old Gilbert desperately kissing his corpse (106-107), of which both Savigny and Thomas are eye witnesses in the shipwreck. The horror revealed by the sea is that the absolute dichotomies of life and death, young and old, man and woman, and, ultimately, good and evil are imaginary, illusionary, relative to the perspective of the subject.

It is in this scenery of misery that Savigny takes the lead of the desperate cannibalistic acts determining survival in the shipwreck, as well as the death of so many including Thomas' beloved Thérèse. Savigny's 'orrenda genialità' [fiendish cleverness] (117) represents the unspeakable violence and hubris where rationality and irrationality are inextricably interwoven. Far from ever being absolute, the

good and the true are relative to the perspective of their essentialising subject, as they sanction also the exclusion, humiliation, and, ultimately, the annihilation of their essentialised Other. The tragic fate which existence bears with it is conflict, as with the waves devouring each other in the mystic harmony of the sea, that is, in the transiency of being. As discussed with respect to the metaphor of the sea, beyond good and evil the divinity to be worshipped can only be an ironically relative truth, that is, the relativist awareness of the imaginary character of all forms of absolute truth and essentialist subjectivity. This is represented in the novel with its meta-literary ontological doubt and its narratological system of characters. Following the narrative line of Elisewin's allegorical journey from the occult disease of Carewall to her healing in the ontologically dubious setting of Almayer Inn, the horror of the shipwreck is remedied, remediated, re-valued, and sublimated in the parables of the many stories interlacing in a self-avowedly imaginary dimension of creativity and ironic (self-)criticism, as the irony of knowing one's own perspective's limitedness is fully exploited:

È un po' come sentirsi morire. O sparire. Ecco: *sparire*. Sembra che gli occhi ti scivolino via dalla faccia, e le mani diventano come le mani di un altro... il fatto è che... questo è davvero l'orrore... il fatto è che *non ci sono più pensieri* [...] ma solo *sensazioni*, capite? Sensazioni... è un tanfo insopportabile, un sapore di morte qui nella gola, una febbre, e una morsa, qualcosa che morde, un demonio che ti morde e ti fa a pezzi, una...<sup>202</sup> (26).

---

<sup>202</sup> 'It's a bit like the feeling of dying. Or vanishing. There: *vanishing*. It feels as though your eyes slip off your face, and your hands become like someone else's hands. Trouble is, this is the horror – no thoughts are left. Only feelings, you know? Feelings... it's an unbearable stench, a taste of

Lady Elisewin suffers from a mysterious disease, in the description of which she stresses the perceptions of disappearing, thoughtlessness, and sensations associated to agony. It is a ‘malattia, che una malattia non era, ma qualcosa di meno, se ha un nome dev’essere leggerissimo, lo dici e già è sparito’ [an illness which was not an illness, if it has a name that must be feather-light, by the time you say it, it’s gone], as insisted upon in the iteration of the phrase on the first two pages of *Oceano mare*’s second chapter. As apparent from the analysis of the novel’s overarching metaphor, disappearing or transiency is the central idea of the literary text, which looks, in this respect, as a postmodern *memento mori* in a particularly rich and creative version. Elisewin’s condition is as fragile and precious as a ‘velo di seta’ [veil of silk] (14), which becomes the metaphor for the tragic fate of wo/man as soon as Elisewin’s story is interpreted as an irreverent and poetical postmodern remediation of the story of Christ.

The narrator’s ironical internally rhymed intrusion ‘(s)e la deve essere chiesta anche Dio, questa’ [God must have wondered about this, too] (15) referring to her father, the baron of Carewall, whose name is telling, provides an initial hint. His tailor’s name, Edel, whose task is to prepare a silky landscape suitable for Elisewin’s living space, betrays the baron’s intention of protecting his child in a garden of Eden, as if in a heaven on earth. The rolls of silk, then, ‘pesavano come croci in processione’ [were as heavy as crosses at a procession], and the wo/men in the landscape ‘(s)e proprio ci devono essere ... volino, e lontano’ [if must really be there, they should fly far away], as their tragic fate is

---

death here in your throat, a fever, a vicelike grip, something that bites, a devil that bites you to pieces, some...’

‘male’, that is, *evil*, with the obvious assonance with *mare*, that is, sea. As Christ severs himself from God Father to show wo/men the way to eternity, it is with the condition of transiency, or, more bluntly, the biting demon (‘che ... morde ...’) of mortality (*mortalitas*), that Elisewin is concerned, as it were, to death, which takes her and her assistant Father Pluche – rightly a religious minister – all the way to the beach where wo/man meets the sea, far away from heaven. Her final destination and the ultimate message of her story amount to a Nietzschean revaluation of Christian morality in the fatalist sublimation of wo/man’s mortality with a relativist wisdom beyond good and evil. Leaving this to the discussion of the character of Elisewin in the narratological system of the novel, the interpretation of her occult disease as a metaphor for the fear of transiency deserves some attention, as transiency seems to be the central theme of the literary text.

While Elisewin’s story represents, *inter alias*, the revaluation of religion, as will be contended further, the story of her disease itself constitutes a postmodern ironic revaluation not only of religion and socio-political organisation, as suggested in the anecdote of the (F)ather wary of wo/man, but also of the cultural institutions supposedly capable of saving wo/man from the tragic fate of silky transiency, whether high art, medicine, science, or technology. As neither Father Pluche’s prayers, or, for this matter, Elisewin’s (F)ather’s own will, nor Edel’s artistic representation of the silky landscape, or the silky technology of the sophisticated architectural spaces planned to safeguard her life in constant jeopardy, can heal Elisewin, the baron calls for a doctor. In fact, ‘[...] dove falliva Dio poteva farcela la scienza ... toccava ad Atterdel’ [when God

failed, science could do the trick, it was Atterdel's turn] (24), the doctor whose name hints at the *aterrante* [frightening] action of secularisation in shifting attention from the afterlife to life on earth (*terra*). However, the cultural change from the hegemony of religion to that of *techne* and *scientia* does not look like a straight line of progress ascending towards some essential *telos*; rather, change resembles the spiral of eternal recurrence, as is the case in the baron's tactical change of strategy from religion, technology, and art to modern medical science.

'Hanno questo, di buono, gli uomini di scienza: ... sono sicuri' [Scientists have this good feature: they have no doubts] (25); with another one of the postmodern narrator's ironic intrusions, the satire of science starts from the security with which the occult disease is treated medically, as if the fear of the occult, that ineffable '*paura*' [fear] of disappearing haunting Elisewin, were an abnormality to be fixed, whereas it is inherent in the condition of existence, and constitutes the very insecurity which the deceitful security of science cannot escape. In fact, Elisewin's disease is simply the insecurity coterminous of being in an environment of things '*vere*' [real] which '*urlano*' [scream] (26) the unpredictable possibilities of the ensuing stories, as evident when interpreting Elisewin's own description of her symptoms in the context of the literary text. This is condensed in the powerful image of the (F)ather sleeping '*tutto rannicchiato*' [cuddled up] like a baby (27), which reminds Elisewin of just how insecure existence is, when even her (F)ather has no more defences than a baby to face the occult force of being, transiency, disappearing, precariousness. Doctor Atterdel's remedy is suspended with an interminable succession of concatenated sentences stretching along two pages of the novel (28 and 29), in which the plans

of science are characterised as irremediably ‘*comici*’ [hilarious] in their ‘*fredda sicurezza*’ [cold sureness], and finally the ‘*esperimento*’ [experiment] prescribed by Atterdel as a remedy is named by Carewall with the surprised utterance: ‘*Il mare?*’ [the sea?]. Ironically, the scientist reassures the baron that ‘(i)l mare vi restituirà vostra figlia. Morta, forse. Ma se viva, viva davvero’ [the sea will give your daughter back to you. Dead, perhaps. But if alive, alive for real] (47), following the blind modern scientific logic willing to kill the victims of its ludicrous experiments with the best intentions (43). The ultimate postmodern irony – that is, the irony of unexpected outcomes derived from perspectival unawareness – is that the medical doctor’s ludicrous scientific experiment of treating the supposed mental disease with the sea leads Elisewin straight to her remedy of relativism, as will be discussed in the section on the characters.

From religion to science, the revaluation of culture represented by the occult disease points to the remediation of the occult force of being in its creative and critical sublimation onto relativist cultural forms. Elisewin’s illness is the ‘*patrigno osceno*’ [nasty step-father] (68) of the ‘*orrore*’ [horror] (69) haunting existence in the unpredictable transience of being. Rather than a disease, this is the tragic fate of *wo/man*, as the same condition recurs in all other characters, who all seek for a state of suspension from the transience of being, as will be discussed further. In particular, the stories of Thomas/Adams and Ann Deverià are symmetrically opposed and parallel to Elisewin’s, respectively. In both cases, the remedy is the creative and critical sublimation of the occult. The story of Thomas/Adams is a parable opposed to Elisewin’s journey from the overprotective Carewall to the occult sea, as he travels from the open sea to the



city without walls – in striking contrast to Carewall – of Timbuktu, with its legendary luxurious gardens, and to the ‘esattezza’ [exactness] of admiral Langlais’ garden of roses (60-61), before coming to Almayer Inn. While Elisewin moves from the absolutist failures of Carewall to the relativist discovery of the sea, Thomas/Adams moves from the nihilist shock of the shipwreck to the relativist game of Timbuktu’s and Langlais’ gardens, where the occult and wild is cultivated with a wall-less openness devoid of the absolutist excesses of socio-political organisation, high art, religion, technology, science, or medicine. Ann’s story, then, runs parallel to Elisewin’s, as the adulterous woman runs from the wall and care of social obligations to the relativist cultivation of all occult desires (79) learnt from the undulation of the sea. In this intratextual relations it is possible to interpret the occult disease of the novel as a metaphor for the absolutist and/or nihilist existential condition in which it is necessary to come to terms with the relativity of being. Being ceases to hurt, as if it were an abnormal condition to be fixed, as soon as its relativity is fatalistically embraced. The disease of the novel hints at the painful limits to be overcome in existence.

Although Almayer Inn is sketched only in passing in a few parts of the novel, the transient setting of this parable of transience is an important device to represent the dimension of existential relativity beyond good and evil in *Oceano mare*. At both Bartleboom’s and Thomas/Adams’ check-in (17; 76), it is as ‘(u)n letto di carta appena rifatto che aspettava i sogni di nomi altrui’ [a freshly set up paper-bed awaiting the dreams of someone else’s names] that the guestbook appears, metonymically alluding to Almayer Inn’s function as the place for the characters of the book to rest and dream, or actually to take ironic distance from

the absolutism and/or nihilism of their lives and continue to dream, knowing that they are in a dream. Once in his room, Bartleboom describes the inn ‘come [...] una nave’ [like a ship] (21), which suggests more than the geographical proximity to the beach.

In fact, the ‘mobilio’ [furniture] (19) of his room ironically includes Dood, the sinisterly named child who interacts with his dreams and ever contemplates the sea. The association of the child with the inn’s furniture hints at the importance of the inn’s alliterationally named children as integral and vital parts of Almayer Inn. The name-knower Dira, the absent-minded Dood, the dream-player Ditz, the ship-seer Dol, and the beautiful anonymous share the talent of fuelling the inn’s guests’ *imagination* of telling stories (*dire* in Italian) to overcome death (*dood* in Dutch), which is implied in the name *Almayer* related to the Sanskrit *maya*, i.e. game of illusions, exactly as the words *magic* and *image/imagination*. All these innuendos converge in the interpretation of Almayer Inn as the ship on the sea of transiency, that is, the relativist dimension of creative and critical sublimation where it is possible to revalue existence.

Almayer Inn ‘quasi non esiste’ [almost doesn’t exist] (163), as it represents the awareness of the imaginary character of all entities named and defined in space and time, caught as they are in the transiency of being. It is a self-avowed literary ‘ritratto’ [portrait] (129) with no claims to verisimilitude, which makes the guests wonder whether they are not risking a ‘naufragio’ [shipwreck] staying in such a precarious place. In fact, the inn is all but an invincible fortress:

Pareva – lì, così solitaria – come dimenticata. Quasi che una processione di locande, di ogni genere e età, fosse passata un giorno da lì, costeggiando il mare, e tra tutte se ne fosse staccata, una, per stanchezza, e lasciatisi sfilare accanto le compagne di viaggio avesse deciso di fermarsi su quell’accenno di collina, arrendendosi alla propria debolezza, chinando il capo e aspettando la fine. Così era la locanda Almayer. Aveva quella bellezza di cui solo i vinti sono capaci. E la limpidezza delle cose deboli. E la solitudine, perfetta, di ciò che si è perduto.<sup>203</sup> (36-37)

The inn’s attributes of loneliness, forgetfulness, tiredness, weakness, fatalist surrender, limpidity, and loss hint at the remediation of the absolutist ethos in the relativism characterising the *pensiero debole* developed by the Nietzschean critic Gianni Vattimo, Alessandro Baricco’s teacher of philosophy.<sup>204</sup> Weak thought means deconstructing seemingly strong and effective norms by challenging them. In light of the Nietzschean revaluation, the novel’s setting is an integral part of the overarching metaphor of transiency.

Almayer Inn provides the remedy to the fear of transiency. In its elusive architecture and unlikely furniture of angel-like creatures, it stands for the power of imagination to engage in a creative and critical sublimation of the force of

---

<sup>203</sup> ‘It looked – there, so solitary – almost deserted. As though a procession of inns, of all ages and genders, had walked by one day, and only one had severed herself, feeling tired, and let her travelmates march on, deciding to stop at that tiny hill, surrendering to her own weakness, bowing her head awaiting the end. That was what Almayer Inn was like. It held the beauty which only the vanquished are capable of. And the cleanness of all weak things. And the perfect solitude of what has been lost.’

<sup>204</sup> Sadly, Mr Vattimo has recently made very essentialist statements about Israel. I wish to point out that his previous work on weak thought and Nietzschean philosophy has no trace of essentialist leanings, and is clearly incompatible with his latest uninformed siding with an openly fundamentalist illegal organization (Hamas). I take this chance to express my wish that this and any other Nietzschean endeavours be beneficial to laying bare and debunking both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, along with all current essentialist trends of social injustice.

being. This consists of the fatalist acceptance of the transiency of being, and of the revaluation of all valuations distinguishing good and evil as imaginary and contingent. With this ironic awareness, it is possible to face the relativity of existence, like admiral Langlais:

[...] scivolava secondo un'immutabile geometria di abitudini che sfiorava la sacralità di una liturgia. Si difendeva, Langlais. Stringeva la propria esistenza in una rete di millimetriche regole capaci di ammortizzare la vertigine dell'immaginario a cui, ogni giorno, concedeva la propria mente. Le iperboli che da tutti i mari del mondo arrivavano fino a lui si placavano sulla meticolosa diga disegnata da quelle minute certezze. Come un placido lago, le attendeva, un passo più in là, la saggezza di Langlais. Immobile e giusta.<sup>205</sup> (54)

Admiral Langlais, who hires Adams/Thomas as a gardener before his journey to Almayr Inn, devotes himself fully to the deployment of the force of imagination. In this respect, he is the emblem of the ontological doubt running through *Oceano mare*, where being as essence gives way to being as transiency in existential relativity. In this relativist conception, being manifests itself in a relentless flow of stories imagined in the creation and destruction of subjects. Langlais' existence is a relativist game sustained in the delicate balance between his imagination and the ensuing rules, which manifest and constrain his very imagination. His *certainities*

---

<sup>205</sup> 'He slipped on, following an unchanging geometry of customs nearly as holy as liturgy. Langlais was defending himself. He tightened his life in a web of minuscule rules apt to soften the dizzy imaginary where he would indulge his mind daily. The hyperboles reaching him from all seas of the world would stop at the skilful dyke drawn by those tiny certainties. Like a peaceful lake, Langlais' wisdom awaited them, only one step away. Still and fair.'

are not the absolute ones of *geometry* and *liturgy*; actually, they are *minute* and relative, as he is a weak thinker *à la* Vattimo, that is, one such thinker who deconstructs the weak and limited normative perspectives involved in social wishes. When he notices that Adams/Thomas ‘(s)embrava per sempre esiliato in un mondo inesorabilmente altrove’ [looked permanently exiled in a world irredeemably elsewhere] (58), he wishes and manages to disclose his *stories* thanks to the magical *exactitude* of his garden of roses (60). In relativist play it is possible to constrain and, fascinatingly exactly thereby, manifest the force of being. This creative and critical sublimation points meta-literarily to the very game played by the author of the novel, himself, weaving together the enchanted, disenchanted, and, ultimately, re-enchanted and (en/disen/)re-enchanting dimension of *Oceano mare*. While it would be possible to find traces of the novel’s meta-literary thread everywhere along the literary text, focusing on the narrative line of Elisewin’s journey enables a panoramic discussion of ontological doubt in meta-literary devices.

As with her occult disease and ensuing unusual lifestyle, Elisewin’s departure from Carewall looks like a ‘sogno’ [dream] (51), and the event lingers on in the tales of the local people as pure ‘fantasia’ [fantasy] (52). Once arrived at Almayer Inn, the place seems to be ‘niente di *reale*’ [nothing real], as it, actually, ‘non esiste’ [does not exist] (92) at all. The story of Elisewin is narrated as if she knew herself that hers is only an imaginary story, which she does not seem to mind in the end. On the contrary, her journey, as will be discussed further, stands for the relativist initiation whereby she overcomes her disease of disappearing, which is the tragic fate of all stories caught in the flow of being, and fatalistically

embraces the relativity of existence inspired by the *memento mori* of the sea in the unlikely landscape dotted by Almayer Inn. Ultimately, the ontological doubt pervading the literary text in the form of postmodern irony discloses the existential chance finally grasped by Elisewin. The ensuing Nietzschean awareness is that of being simply in a fairy-tale.

It is this relativist irony that distinguishes her from Adams during their exaggeratedly romantic animal-like mating (137), which is deliberately and self-avowedly told in the way in which the people of Carewall would tell it. While Adams succumbs to the gravity of his murderous plans which would follow the sexual scene, and strives to confess his future crime to Elisewin as if to protect her from some serious danger, Elisewin knows that if things are so grave it is only a matter of perspective, whereas actually Adams could just forget his vengeful intentions and open himself up to the relativity of existence, as will be discussed further. Their union is narrated as if in a parody of romantic scenes, where everything is so hyperbolic as to meta-literarily hint at the scene's imaginary character as a story of fantasy being told. Elisewin finds in the experience the sea and the remedy to her disease, that is, the openness to the countless stories flowing in the transience of being, which she eventually shares with the relative god of imagination, Langlais, as will be discussed further. What is gained is the fatalist acceptance of a relativist ontology, where entities are not stable essences, but constructs of the imaginary force unfolding in the transience of being. This is the relativism of the writer in the seventh room, a meta-literary alter ego of the novel's author, who does not curse or bless the sea with the sacred absolute essences worshipped in religion or science, but rather *says*, or actually *tells*, the

stories flowing amongst the relative waves of existence. The meaning of *Oceano mare* is the existential chance of embracing the countless possible representations and interpretations, which is put forward from the first pages and finds elaboration in the ingenious narrative construction and juxtaposition of self-avowedly fantastic characters and stories.

*Oceano mare* tells the story of the writer himself as a storyteller who, during a fantastic stay at the inn of death-overcoming imaginative storytelling, tells a multiple story about telling stories, made up of the skilfully concatenated stories of Thomas/Adams, Elisewin, Father Pluche, Bartleboom, Plasson, Ann Deverià, and André Savigny, with whom Thomas/Adams wants to settle accounts after his stay at Langlais'. In turn, it is to Thomas/Adams, and eventually to Langlais, that Elisewin is drawn, when Father Pluche takes her from her father, the baron of Carewall, to the D-named angels of Almayer Inn, where the storyteller himself is staying. There, Father Pluche's religious play offers company to Bartleboom's scientific, Plasson's artistic, and Ann's relativistic play, the last of which involves André, on whom Thomas takes revenge, closing the stories' circle. The underlying morale is the importance of overcoming the ideal of an absolute morale, as the essentialist ideal of absolute truth, good or value is overcome in a metousiastic dimension, where the absolute value of the essentialist conceptions of being and subjectivity sustaining any stories dissolves in the relativity of value to the particular perspective of the story told in the whole of flowing stories, which is conveyed in the image of the *ocean sea*, with the multiple unity of the essential absolute and the metousiastic relative. *Oceano mare* is the story of the value of participating in the constructive and destructive

transiency of being by manifesting the force of imagination in the creative criticism of interpretation, representation, narration. The sea-like oscillation between wall-like absolutist unity, abyss-like abysmal nihilist nothingness, and wave-like relativist multiplicity results in the different characters and stories, which participate in and manifest a narrative whole where the ideal of being and subjectivity as essences finds remedy, remediation, and revaluation in cultural sublimation, intersectional and intertextual hybridisation, and metousiastic overcoming.

The baron of Carewall and Elisewin's representation of absolutism and relativism is tied up with Langlais and Adams' representation of relativism and the nihilism of the sea-womb occult, the abyss abysmal, the shipwreck of disenchantment. In fact, Elisewin moves away from her father to Adams and, then, Langlais, in a narrative which is intertextually related to God-Son's descent on earth, crucifixion, and resurrection, where the messiah's universal message loses its absoluteness facing the apocalyptic nothingness which, eventually, gives way to existential relativity. As discussed with regard to her unknown disease, Elisewin's story starts in the *care walls* of a paradise created by her father, and soon lost when she has to move to the sea, where she *falls* exactly with the tellingly named Adams. Unsurprisingly, the postmodern remediation of Christ associates him not only to an ordinary woman, but exactly to the prototypical woman, whose name is also evoked by the baron's daughter's own, blamed for the divine punishment of humankind, including the very condition of mortality.

In the pathetically hyperbolic sexual scene with Adams, Elisewin absorbs magically all of his stories of the shipwreck's ultimate horror and of Timbuktu's



openness. In the obviously orgasmic end, topically associated with death in the text with yet one more twist of postmodern irony here also suggesting *Christa's* crucifixion, she resurrects in the Nietzschean over(wo)manly form of a relativist storyteller, soon thereafter joining the lord of the arbitrary called the Englishman in French, Langlais, *A(wo)men(!)*. In fact, while Adams' relativist task as Langlais' gardener was only one step in his nihilist vengeful plan to find André Savigny with his lover Ann Deveria, Elisewin embraces the relativity of existence symbolised by the sea tide, where the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* cycle of the eternal return reveals that revenge is vain (139), while it is the critical creativity of cyclically ever-recurring storytelling which offers meaning and value, in which she engages at Langlais' until the admiral's death while listening to her fantastic stories (145-146). Having learnt from Langlais that 'tra tutte le vite possibili, a una bisogna ancorarsi per poter contemplare, sereni, tutte le altre', she can finally go back home with the *wonderful* ('meraviglioso') power, inspired by the transient undulation of the occult sea, to self-critically and self-creatively *invent* ('*i*nventar', emphasis in the original) her own story, yet unknown.

The story of Elisewin remedies, remediates, revalues, sublimates, and overcomes essentialism in the intersections of class, sex, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and disability. While an essentialist account of the story of Christ would emphasise his social ascent from his native cave to his success as a preacher, his masculinity and chastity, his adulthood at the time when he starts to preach, his ethnic belonging to the elected people, and his social skills, Elisewin's relativist revaluation is intertextually related to Christ's openness to the lower classes, women and also prostitutes, sinners, children, foreigners, and the ill; Elisewin's

own intersectional identity sublimates Christ's creative criticism of the systematic exclusion sanctioned in culture and society. In fact, Elisewin willingly leaves her privileged initial position, and her return suggests her intention to create her own life without relying on her father's *care walls*. She is a woman who becomes an ingenious storyteller during sexual intercourse with a foreigner, as if impregnated with stories. At least equally remarkably, she is only sixteen years old, and she suffers from an unknown disease. Far from suggesting that the sea defeated the disease, the textual elements discussed hint at Elisewin's fatalistic acceptance of the conditions of uncertainty, mortality, transiency, in the embracement of the relativist existential chance of interpretation, representation, narration. Ultimately, the subtle suggestion is that differences of class, sex, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and disability are relative to the interpretation represented in the relevant discursive narrative. Elisewin's intersectional and intertextual story overcomes the essentialist discourses constructed by religion, science, and elitist art, in the fatalistic openness to the metousiastic relativity of existence.

In particular, the extratextual associations of Elisewin to Eve, Christ, and Krishna, along with the reference to the African capital of Islam, Timbuktu, suggest the potential for the world religions to overcome their essentialist conflicts in the discovery of their shared openness to the multifarious forms of being. Eve's – this time messianic and redemptive – female receptivity, Christ's openness to the excluded, Krishna's fatalistic acceptance of the eternal recurrence of the same, and the intellectual flexibility of which the Islamic civilisation based in Timbuktu is a historical centre, all converge in the story of Elisewin in *Almayer Inn*. In the context of the characters' multilingual European names, *Almayer Inn*

appears as a utopian image of European relativist inter-culture, where the European identity culminated in the destructive creation of America results, actually, from the dialectical exchange with Africa and Asia. In this respect, the Judaeo-Christian tradition does play an important role; however, this is not the case in an essentialist sense, but in Christianity's relations with African and Asian cultures. Namely, the relativist openness present across the continents and beliefs of the world is a distinguishing feature of European identity, with a great potential in an ever more interconnected and intercultural global system.

The absolutisms of religion, science and high art are represented by Pluche, Bartleboom, and Plasson, respectively, who are like the three kings eventually worshipping the new messiah of relativity. Pluche embodies the relativist remediation of religion, where there are 'tante strade intorno e nessuna dentro' (153) as every different cultural form is valid in its own right, and 'preghiera' involves 'il profumo dell'attesa' (155), i.e. one of the possible cultural forms available to come to terms with the transiency of being. In his act of writing extravagantly long-titled prayers, the absolutism of religion gives way to the relativism of representation, facing the transient condition of mortality and uncertainty. When questioned by the scientist, Bartleboom, about God's existence (94-95), he compares the question with that of the seventh guest's existence, witnessed by none but the sinister name-knowing inn-receptionist Dira. Besides associating God to the storyteller in the seventh room, suggesting the divinity of the relative act of storytelling, the utterance hints at the relativity of divinity to the act of storytelling and naming embodied by Dira, as also condensed in her own name.

The ensuing nominalist view of existence as relative to the conventions of language and communication is represented by ten-year-old Dira exactly at Bartleboom's check-in (18), when the title *prof.* in his signature means nothing but a name to her, whereas for him it describes his essence as a professor. In fact, Bartleboom's scientific essentialism (35) entails the abstraction and description of the eternal essences of reality. To this aim, he envisages to discover the end of the sea, and write an encyclopaedic entry about it. Aged thirty-eight (22), his public contribution as a scientist goes hand in hand with his private collection of letters for the woman whom he wishes to meet and love one day. His comic parable is accompanied by the symmetrical one of the artist Plasson who strives to paint the sea starting from its beginning, that is, its unidentifiable eyes (70-75). The only hint comes from the ghastly named inn-child Dood, who states that the eyes of the sea are the ships, which are most of the time invisible due to the sea's closing its eyes with shipwrecks. Ultimately, science and art can only surrender to their relativity in the transiency of being.

The elitist essentialism of science and high art is doomed to failure, as both Bartleboom's and Plasson's absolutist wishes to determine where the sea starts and where it ends are ridiculed all along the novel. Among Plasson's white canvases, only one '(d)ubbia attribuzione' (171-172) representing a surreal shipwreck seems to be inspired by the transiency of being whose emblem is the sea. As to Bartleboom, his public contribution as a scientist amounts to his being constantly on leave to work on his encyclopaedia, and when he feels he has found his love, he is so confused between her and her twin sister that he ends up with no partner at all. This is narrated in a carnivalesque crescendo of postmodern irony,

culminating in his unstoppable laughing, literally, to death. Bartleboom's and Plasson's comic parables suggest the relativity of the absolute values sanctioned in science and high art. With the addition of Pluche, the novel represents the bowing of art, science and religion in front of the relativity of existence.

The relativism of the *ocean sea* is represented by Ann and André. As her husband's last name suggests, Ann Deveria faces the conflicts deriving from moral and social *duties*. She is 'malata di adulterio' (36), as her tragic fate is to follow her hubris challenging her family ties in an extra-conjugal relationship with André Savigny, whose last name hints at the ambiguity of *knowledge*. '(S)apere' and 'ricevere' (38) represent the key to Ann's story, where Ann is explicitly associated to Christ's mother (39). In fact, Ann does not strive for absolute knowledge. On the contrary, she is open to receive being as it is, transient and occult. She is ready to 'perdere tutto, per tutto trovare' (164) in the magic of the 'istante' (165). Hers is the relativist wisdom of the critical and creative acceptance of the fatal transiency of being. This wisdom is itself the relative *knowledge* gained by Savigny in the shipwreck, in contrast to Thomas/Adams' nihilism culminating in the vengeful murder of Ann. This extreme act follows Adams' loss of faith in any value, which is an absolutist disenchantment, or nihilism. Paradoxically, his loss of faith in social justice leads him to follow blindly the equally absolutist logic of personal justice in revenge, where, however, the attempt to stop the ever critically creative force of being, with its cannibalistic succession of waves, is doomed to failure, as conflict will eternally recur in different forms regardless of his violent act, which is itself merely a return to the violence which kindled it. In Ann, André, and Adams'

tragic fate, witnessed by the kings of religion, art, and science, the messiah of relativism, Elisewin, embraces the metousiastic existential chance of interpretation and representation, represented by the storyteller in the seventh and last room of Almayer Inn. In the critical and creative cycle of narrative destruction and construction, it is possible to sublimate the violence of being onto imagination.

The creative criticism of wave-like relativist multiplicity is represented by the inn's last guest, who is the writer himself. Flowing from the inn of imagination, his stories overcome and sublimate essentialism by virtue of their own limited intersectional perspectives as interpretations and representations in the transiency of being, where existence discloses its relativity with the breathtaking metaphor of the ocean sea.

The portrayal of Paul Pokriefke's and Elisewin's healing through storytelling hinges on the friction between her new skill of boundless interpreting and their initial disease of fear and essential purity. This feeling of unease and anxiety marks the representation of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the memory of authoritarian violence in the novel *Black Dogs* by Ian McEwan. In the novel, the marginal spokesperson of these mystical insights is the dying woman June thought by some to be mad, in whose renewed awareness are echoed the endless openness of the sea-ocean and the anxiety of essential identity:

[Feeling] safe on this piece of land [...] under the high cliff of the plateau.

[Feeling] delivered into [yourself], [feeling] changed. This, now, here.

[T]his [is] what existence strain[s] to be, and so rarely ha[s] the chance, to

savour itself fully in the present, this moment in all its simplicity – the smooth darkening summer air, the scent of thyme crushed underfoot, [...] hunger, [...] slaked thirst, the warm stone [...] through [your] shirt, the aftertaste of peach, the stickiness on [your] hand, [your] tired legs, [your] sweaty, sunny, dusty fatigue, this obscure and lovely place. [169]

But it is the black dogs I return to most often. [...] [I] think of them, not as animals, but as spirit hounds, incarnations [of dullness and selfishness and fear]. [...] [I] sometimes used to see them, really see them, on the retina, in the giddy seconds before sleep. They are running down the path [...], the bigger one trailing blood on the white stone. They are crossing the shadow line and going deeper where the sun never reaches, [...] crossing the river in the dead of night, and forcing a way up to the other side [...]; and as sleep rolls in they are receding [...], black stains in the grey of the dawn, fading as they move into the foothills of the mountains from where they will return to haunt us, somewhere [...], in another time. [173-4]

[Fear] takes hold in an individual [...], within a family, and then it's children who suffer most. And then, when the conditions are right, in different countries, at different times, [...] a viciousness against life erupts, and everyone is surprised by the depth of hatred within himself. Then it sinks back and waits. [...]

[N]ature, [...] the spirit, the soul, consciousness itself – call it what you like – in the end, it's all we've got to work with. It has to develop and expand, or the sum of our misery will never diminish. [Our] small discovery has been that this change is possible, it is within our power.

Without a revolution of the inner life, however slow, all our big designs are worthless. The work we have to do is with ourselves [...]. I'm not saying it'll happen. There's a good chance it won't. I'm saying it's our only chance. If it does, and it could take generations, [what] flows from it will shape our societies in an unprogrammed, unforeseen way, under the control of no single group of people or set of ideas. [172]

Everyone has to make [a discovery]. People use different language to describe it. [A]ll the great world religions began with individuals making inspired contact with a spiritual reality and then trying to keep that knowledge alive. Most of it gets lost in rules and practices and addiction to power. That's how religions are. In the end though it hardly matters how you describe it once [its meaning] has been grasped – that we have within us an infinite resource, a potential for a higher state of being.

Call it [...] the Atman [...] or the laws of nature. [It's] a halo of coloured light around [your] body. But the appearance is irrelevant. What matters is to make the connection with this centre, this inner being, and then extend and deepen it. Then carry it outwards, to others. [A] healing power [...].

[60]

This novel's historical engagement with the fall of the Berlin wall and ubiquitous authoritarian patterns sparks insightful reflections on the sources of everyday oppression. The black dogs of authoritarian patterns have to be kept at bay through the daily welcoming of outsiders in one's own sense of belonging. The sharing enacted and fostered by June in *Black Dogs*, Elisewin in *Oceano mare*,



and Paul in *Im Krebsgang* pave the way for a sense of belonging which rests on the blending and blurring of all social and historical boundaries.

### *The Category of Overcoming*

The metousiastic relativist motif of transnational awareness and hubris overcoming national belonging is a key feature of *La sconosciuta*, *Auf der anderen Seite*, *Oceano mare*, and *Im Krebsgang*, as well as of *Black Dogs*, *Nadine*, and *Um filme falado*. Their insights complete the picture of metousiastic relativism offered by films and novels from *Uno, nessuno e centomila* and *Das Glasperlenspiel* to *Vier Minuten*. The metousiastic themes and styles dealing with health, age, and sex are mirrored in those revolving around ethnicity. The prostitute in the Italian film, the bookshop keeper in the German film, the noble lady in the Italian novel, and the journalist in the German novel are relativist characters who represent the metousiastic overcoming of national essences through their liminality at the borders between Ukraine and Italy, Turkey and Germany, the land and the sea, and the past and the present.

## VI. CONCLUSION: THE AESTHETICS OF METOUSIA AND EUROPEAN RELATIVISM

Strong links between themes and styles from novels and films across national borders show that a frame for European identity can be found in the metousiastic relativism of situational otherness and cultural blending. The goal of this enquiry has been to find such intertextual connections and to analyse the relevant textual imagery. This reading of German and Italian films and novels has discussed a set of styles and topics that show the meaning of relativism for European identity, which contributes to the debate on European identity and essentialism from a literary and cinematic angle. The previous chapters do this with a focus on textual images of body and mind as fluid, work and play as ecstatic, social relationships with their eroticism, and cross-cultural encounters marked by hubris.

The links made here are not aimed at providing an exhaustive or all-encompassing discussion of this subject, but rather an experimental analytic overview built on poststructuralist textual readings of select Italian and German films and novels, also with comparisons to works from other European countries which underline possible research questions for any related criticism to come. The findings given in the previous chapters can be summed up in the following: the German and Italian films and novels chosen show the meaning of relativism for European identity by staging styles and topics that reappraise a) bodily and mental decay, b) playful everydayness, c) subversive kinship, and d) cultural crossbreeding. To conclude this inquiry, what follows aims to expand on these intertextual links by highlighting their reframing of European identity within

metousiastic relativism, while also pointing out the questions opened up for further discussion.

The films and novels selected shift cinematic and literary stress from belonging to a blending of features from the poles of mind and body, work and play, social relationships, and cross-cultural encounters. These narratives display and displace the binaries of high essential shape over low monstrously misshapen margins framed as mind over body, work over play, public over private sphere, and home over foreign interests. This displacement and replacement involves a metousiastics of culture, where the essence or ousia of cultural identity is shifted away and beyond, or *meta*, its socially and historically constructed centre. A relativist blurring of essentialist and absolutist boundaries is thus condensed in the four metousiastic blends of bodily flux, playful ecstasy, social eros, and cross-cultural hubris. Far from merely indulging in spectacular individual dramas of dazzling estrangement incarnated by their monstrously uncommon characters, whose uncommon features are perceived as monstrous by dull and essentialist antagonists, these works engage with the ever-changing collective memory of European identity marked by relativism and a decisive move away from essentialist sources of cultural identity. The interdisciplinary and intersectional approach adopted is in tune with the redefinition of collective identities espoused in the films and novels in review:

Most academics are trained to look for divergences and disparities rather than for similarities and affinities, but this relentless urge to draw distinctions often results in important connections and resemblances being

overlooked. Despite constant urgings to the contrary, humanity has not been, is not now, and should not be best or solely understood in terms of simple, unified homogeneous collectivities locked in perpetual confrontation and conflict across a great chasm of hatred and an unbridgeable gulf of fear. The real world is not binary – except insofar as it is divided into those who insist that it is and those who know that it is not. For it is in the very range, complexity, and diversity of our multifarious and manifold identities, and in the many connections we make through them and across them, that we each affirm [...] [what] we share.<sup>206</sup>

The non-binary welcoming of outside-ness in ever new forms of identity is the metousiastic relativism shared by the themes and styles analysed in this inquiry.

Bodily flux is the driving force for playful ecstasy and social eros, which are shaped as cross-cultural hubris when practices from different cultural frames are blurred and blended. The novels by Juli Zeh and Luigi Pirandello, along with the films by Gianni Amelio and Ralf Huettner, challenge the historical discourse of essentialist mindfulness through grotesque narratives of mindful re-embodiment and empowerment for mentally and physically ill characters, in the chapter on body and mind. The awareness of re-embodied mindfulness as a cyclical flux of individual and collective memory, rather than essentialist linear memory, is what hyperbolically drives the ecstasy of play and erotic desire, as well as the hubris of cross-cultural hybridity, in all the remaining literary and

---

<sup>206</sup> Cannadine, David, *The Undivided Past: History Beyond our Differences*, London: Penguin Books (2013), pp. 9-10.

cinematic works examined. Flux, ecstasy, eros, and hubris share the hyperbolic imagery of the cycle, which serves as a powerful image of the metousiastics of culture where European identity is reshaped and reframed over and over again by the relativist interplay and display of historically renegotiated selfsameness and situational otherness.

The shift from flux to ecstasy is found in the films by Matteo Garrone and Michael Haneke, as well as the novels by Hermann Hesse and Umberto Eco. The chapter on work and play shows that their respective narratives share an overthrow where playfulness beats the dullness of alienating work. This subversion is displayed at the level of eros and kinship in the chapter on social relationships, with the novels by Isabella Santacroce and Patrick Süskind, followed by the films by Ferzan Ozpetek and Chris Kraus. Their emphasis on pleasure and transgression overcomes the boundaries of family and parenthood. The higher collective level of state and nationality is explored in the films by Giuseppe Tornatore and Fatih Akın, beside the novels by Alessandro Baricco and Günter Grass. As discussed in the chapter on cross-cultural encounters, these narratives challenge the discourse of ethnic otherness through the trope of daring hubris, which takes bodily flux, playful ecstasy, and subversive eros to the level of cultural belonging and blending.

Flux, ecstasy, eros, and hubris have the respective complementary semantic meanings of change, joy, instinct, and dare. The relativist styles and topics from German and Italian films and novels discussed in this inquiry give textual and discursive flesh and bones to the metousiastics of culture, which is the overcoming of cultural essences hinted at in the debate on essentialism and

European identity. Metousiastic films and novels supply a voice and a shape for a sense of belonging marked by the playful awareness of socio-historical limits and the vibrant drive to redraw them in ever new places.

## Cited References

Abbou, André, "Le quotidien et le sacré: introduction à une nouvelle lecture de *L'Étranger*", in *Albert Camus: oeuvre fermée, oeuvre ouverte?* ed. by Raymond Gay-Crosier and Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, Cahiers Albert Camus 5 (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 231-65.

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1990)

Apter, Emily, "Out of Character: Camus's French Algerian Subjects", *Modern Language Notes*, 112 (1997), 499-516.

Ariès, Philippe, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. ([1960] 1986)

Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993)

Aydemir, Murat, *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World: Carnival and the Grotesque* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968)

Barthes, Roland, *Elements of Semiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967)

Bashford, Alison, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004)

Baudrillard, Jean, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995)

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000)

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006)

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Moderne und Ambivalenz. Das Ende der Eindeutlichkeit* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1991)

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993)

Berger, Peter L., & Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967)

Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994)

Bijker, Wiebe, *The Social Construction of Technological Systems* (Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 1987)

Bloom, Harold, *Luigi Pirandello* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), quoted in Lepschy, Anna Laura, 'Luigi Pirandello', *Modern Language Review* (1991), 86/1, p. 224.

Bonghi, Giuseppe, *Biografia di Luigi Pirandello* (1996),  
<http://www.classicitaliani.it/pirandel/bio/biopirandello05.htm>.

Booth, Wayne, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975)

Bourgeault, Ivy Lynn, 'Sociological perspectives on health and health care', in Dennis Raphael, Toba Bryant & Marcia Rioux (eds.), *Staying Alive. Critical Perspectives on Health, Illness, and Health Care* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc, 2006), p. 49.

Bruckner, Pascal, Enlightenment fundamentalism or racism of the anti-racists?, *Sign and Sight* (24<sup>th</sup> January 2007)

Buruma, Ian, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limit of Tolerance* (London: Penguin Press, 2006)

Buruma, Ian, Freedom cannot be decreed, *Sign and Sight* (29<sup>th</sup> January 2007).

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999)

Cannadine, David, *The Undivided Past: History Beyond our Differences* (London: Penguin Books, 2013)

Camus, Albert, *L'Etranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942)

Camus, Albert, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951)

Carens, Joseph H., *Culture, Citizenship, and Community* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000)

Carpenter, Rebecca, "'We're Not a Friggin' Girl Band'", in *Literature After 9/11*, ed. by Ana Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (New York: Routledge, 2008)

Carroll, David, "Camus's Algeria: birthrights, colonial injustice, and the fiction of a French-Algerian people", *Modern Language Notes*, 112 (1997), 517-49

\_\_\_\_\_, "The colonial city and the question of borders: A. Camus's allegory of Oran", *Esprit créateur*, 41 (2001), 88-104.



Colegrove, De Forest W., Steadfastly European? German (supra)national identity in a rapidly changing Europe, ed. by R. Robyn, *The Changing Face of European Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005)

Conrad & Schneider, *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992)

Conze, Vanessa, *Das Europa der Deutschen: Ideen von Europa in Deutschland zwischen Reichstradition und Westorientierung*, (Munich: Oldenburg Verlag, 2005)

Crenshaw, Kimberle, Intersectionality and identity politics: learning from violence against women of color, in *Feminist theory. A reader*, ed. by W. K. Kolmar & F. Bartkowski (New York: McGrawHill, 2005)

Crumey, Andrew, 'Perils of Seizing the Day', in *Scotland on Sunday* (06/02/2005), p. 8.

Crupi, Vincenzo, *L'altra faccia della luna. Assoluto e mistero nell'opera di Luigi Pirandello* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1997)

Daniel, Jean, "Une patrie algérienne, deux peuples..." , *Études méditerranéennes*, 7 (1960), 19-24.

Dawson, Thomas, 'Review of *The Keys to the House*', *BBC Films* (2005), [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/03/22/the\\_keys\\_to\\_the\\_house\\_2005\\_review.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/03/22/the_keys_to_the_house_2005_review.html)

Deleuze, Gilles, & Guattari, Félix, *L'Anti-Œdipe – Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (1972)

Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, Mar.: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974)

Duncan, Derek (2011), 'Double Time: Facing the Future in Migration's Past', *California Italian Studies* 2(1), p. 16.

Dyer, R. (1997). *White*. London: Routledge

Eco, Umberto, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: MacMillan, 1976)

Fleischer, Margot, *Zwei Absurde: Camus' "Caligula" und "Der Fremde"* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998)

Foucault, Michel, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969)  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Pantheon, 1971); *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Pantheon, 1973); *Discipline and Punish* (New

York: Pantheon, 1977); *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

Fredriksson, Carl Henrik, Att blåsa liv i en europeisk offentlighet, *Eurozine* (2004). Available at: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2004-05-13-fredriksson-sv.html>.

Fukuyama, Francis, After the End of History, *Open Democracy Net* (2<sup>nd</sup> May 2006)

Fukuyama, Francis, Europe vs. Radical Islam, *Slate* (16th February 2006).

Gamson, James, Sexualities, queer theory, and qualitative research. In Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (New York: Sage Publications, 2000).

Gillis, John, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1790–Present*. London: Academic Press (1981)

Gittins, Diana, 'The Historical Construction of Childhood' in Mary Jane Kehily, *An Introduction to Childhood Studies* (McGraw-Hill: Open University Press, 2009), pp. 37-38.

Goffman, Erving, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City: Ancor, 1961); *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963).

Gray, John, *Al Qaeda and What It Means To Be Modern* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003)

Greenberg, Mitchell, *Subjectivity and Subjugation in Seventeenth-Century Drama and Prose: The Family Romance of French Classicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Griffiths, Paul, 'Nor Certitude, Nor Peace', in *First Things* (January 2007), p. 28.

Haas, Jack, & Shaffir, William, 'The Professionalization of Medical Students: Developing Competence and a Cloak of Competence', *Symbolic Interaction* (1977), 1, pp. 71-88.

Habermas, Jürgen, *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*, (Frankfurt: Campus, 1994)

Habermas, Jürgen, Nach dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (2003, May 31)

Habermas, Jürgen, The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment, in *The Frankfurt School*, ed. by J. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 38.

- Habermas, Jürgen, *The Divided West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006)
- Hadley, Elaine, 'On a Darkling Plain', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 48 (2005), pp. 92-102.
- Hallström, Per, *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1934*, speech available at: [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1934/press.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1934/press.html).
- Hargreaves, Alec G., "Camus and the Colonial Question in Algeria", *Muslim World*, 77 (1987), 164-74.
- Heggoy, Alf, "Cultural disrespect: European and Algerian views on women in colonial and independent Algeria", *Muslim World*, 62 (1972), 321-35.
- Henry, Patrick, "Variations of absurdity", *Philosophy Today*, 19 (1975), 358-68.
- Hochschild (2001), Global care chains and emotional surplus value. In H. Hutten & A. Giddens (Eds.), *On the edge: living with global capitalism*. London: Vintage. p. 137.
- hooks, bell (1981), *Ain't I a Woman*, Boston (South End Press)
- Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Free Press, 1996/ 2002)
- Ignatieff, Michael, Human Rights as Idolatry, in A. Gutman, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), p. 71.
- Ignatiev, Noel, (1995), *How the Irish Became White*, London (Routledge)
- Ives, Peter, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto Press, 2004)
- Jary, David, *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991)
- Jordanova, Ludmilla, Children in history: concepts of nature and society, in G. Scarre (ed.) *Children, Parents and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1989)
- Jordanova, Ludmilla, *Languages of Nature. Critical Essays on Science and Literature* (London: Free Association Books, 1986)
- Kamden, Pierre Eugène, "La minimalité dans L'Étranger", *Revue électronique internationale de sciences du langage*, 3 (2003), 37-52.
- Kemmer, Ernst, ed., *Lektüreschlüssel. Albert Camus, "L'Étranger"* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004)

- Klausen, Jytte, *The Islamic Challenge* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005)
- Koenis, Sjaak, *Het verlangen naar cultuur: Nederland en het einde van het geloof in een moderne politiek* (Amsterdam: van Genneep, 2008)
- Kroes, Rob, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1996)
- Lash, Scott, "Genealogy and the Body: Foucault/Deleuze/Nietzsche", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (1984)
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974)
- Lewis, Bernard, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson)
- Licastro, Emanuele, 'Vincenzo Crupi. L'altra faccia della luna', *Book Reviews* (1999), 33/2, pp. 602.
- Lotman, Yuri, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001)
- Lugnani, Lucio, *Pirandello. Letteratura e teatro* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1970)
- Maalouf, Amin, *Les identités meurtrières* (Paris: Grasset, 1998)
- Margerisson, Christine, Orme, Mark, & Lincoln, Lissa, *Albert Camus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reassessment of his Thinking at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2008)
- Margerrison, Christine, "The Dark Continent of Camus's *L'Étranger*", *French Studies*, 55 (2001), 59-73.
- Marlière, Philippe, "Camus against the Tide: Algeria and the Intellectual Doxa", in *Constructing Memories: Camus, Algeria and "Le Premier Homme"*, ed. by Peter Dunwoodie and Edward J. Hughes, 42-51.
- McCarthy, Patrick, "The 'pied-noir' story", *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 June 1994, 26.
- McEwan, Ian, *Saturday* (London: Random House, 2006)
- McGrath, Alister, *The Twilight of Atheism* (London: Rider, 2004)
- Meinhof, Ulrike H., Migrating borders: An Introduction to European Identity Construction in Process, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 29-5 (2003), p. 782.

Meinhof, Ulrike H. (ed.), *Living (with) Borders. Identity Discourses on East-West Borders in Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002)

Merquior, José Guilherme, *Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985)

Mitchell, Larry, *The Faggots and Their Friends* (New York: Calamus Books, 1977)

Mommsen, Wolfgang, *Der europäische Imperialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979)

Mussnug, Florian, "The Foreigner's Gaze: Constructions of National Identity and Alterity in Post-war Italian Literature", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 38., No. 2 (2002), p. 201.

Nederveen Pieterse, Jan, *Neoliberal Empire, Theory, Culture, & Society* (2004), 21/3, p. 123.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Werke in drei Bänden* (Kettwig: Phaidon, 1990)

Oberländer, Jan, „Raus aus der Anstalt! Ralf Huettner's Komödie „vincent will meer“, *Der Tagesspiegel* (2010), <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/raus-aus-der-anstalt/1805800.html>

Opello, Walter C., & Rosow, Stephen J., *The Nation State and Global Order: A Historical Introduction to Contemporary Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), pp. 259-61..

Orr, David, 'Who Needs Mace? Whip Out That Sonnet', in *New York Times Book Review* (26/6/2005), p. 7.

Parekh, Bhikhu, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2000)

Pera, Marcello, *Liberali, Cannibali e Cristiani*, *Il Giornale* (2005, September 22)

Pera, Marcello & Ratzinger, Joseph, *Sena radici: Europa, Relativismo, Cristianesimo, Islam* (Milano: Mondadori, 2004)

Pirandello, Luigi, *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1926)

Pitasi, Andrea, Marchionni, Michela, & Massoni, Maria Francesca, *Italian multiple identities: the Italian perception of national and European belonging*, ed. by R. Robyn, *The Changing Face of European Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 152.

- Prakash, Gyan, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1990), pp. 406-7.
- Ramadan, Tariq, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004)
- Ratzinger, Joseph, Interview for the Catholic International Agency *Zenit* (2002) . Available at: <http://www.zenit.org/article-5961?l=english>.
- Richter, Nanci, *Os espaços infernais e labirínticos em Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (São Paulo, 2007)
- Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)
- Rigney, Ann, Plenitude, Scarcity and the Production of Cultural Memory, *Journal of European Studies* (2006), 35, 1/2, 209-26.
- Risse, Thomas, "Neofunctionalism, European Identity, and the Puzzles of European integration", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2005), p. 296.
- Ritter, Gerhardt, *Europa und die deutsche Frage. Betrachtungen über das geschichtliche Eigenart des deutschen Staatsdenkens* (Munich: München Verlag, 1948)
- Robyn, Richard, *The Changing Face of European Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005)
- Rodio, Antonello, 'Un handicap d'affetto', *Movieplayer* (2004), <http://www.movieplayer.it/articoli/00814/un-handicap-d-affetto>.
- Rorato, Laura & Saunders, Anna (eds.), *The Essence and the Margin: National Identities and Collective Memories in Contemporary European Culture* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009)
- Rowland, Robyn, *Living Laboratories: Women and Reproductive Technologies* (Sydney: Pan MacMillan Publishers Australia, 1992)
- Russel, Jamie, 'Review of *Mar adentro*', *BBC Films* (2005), [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/02/01/the\\_sea\\_inside\\_2005\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/02/01/the_sea_inside_2005_review.shtml).
- Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).
- Sändig, Brigitte, 'Zwei oder drei Fremde: Berührungspunkte zwischen Camus' *L'Étranger* und Christoph Heins' *Der fremde Freund*', in *Die Gegenwart des Absurden*, ed. by Annemarie Pieper (Tübingen: Francke, 1994), 37-52.

Sassen, Saskia, Free Speech in the Frontier Zone, *Open Democracy Net* (20th February 2006). Available at: [http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe\\_islam/freespeech\\_3282.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/freespeech_3282.jsp).

Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Duckworth, 1983)

Seidman, S. (Ed.) (1996) *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers

Severino, Emanuele, *Cosa arcana e stupenda: L'Occidente e Leopardi* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1997/2006)

Severino, Emanuele, Quello spirito critico che viene da Atene, *Repubblica* (20th June 2004)

Severino, Emanuele, *La filosofia futura* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1989/2005)

Seward, Deborah, Fear of Foreigners Fuels Far Right, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (11<sup>th</sup> February 2000), p. 4.

Sheridan, Alan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.)

Simons, Thomas W., *Islam in a Globalizing World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)

Soja, Edward W., *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso: London, 2001)

Storey, I.C., Allan, A., *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama* (Chicago: John Wiley & Sons, 2008)

Stråth, Bo, 'A European Identity. To the Historical Limits of a Concept', *European Journal of Social Theory* (2002), 5, 387-401.

Sturrock, John, *Structuralism* (London: Paladin, 2003)

Szalai, Jennifer, 'DAY-TRIPPER: The mundane raptures of Ian McEwan', in *Harper's Magazine* (2005), pp. 87-92.

Tefarikis, Xrisi, 'Crítica del film *Mar adentro*', *Apocatastasis.com – Literatura y contenidos seleccionados* (2004), <http://www.apocatastasis.com/mar-adentro-critica-cine.php#axzz182E6W7qc>

Vattimo, Gianni, *La società trasparente* (Roma: Garzanti, 1989/2000)

Vignon, Jérôme, Interview in *Carrefours* (December 1997), p. 11.

Wajcman, J. (1991). Reproductive technology: Delivered into men's hands. In *Feminism confronts technology*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Walther, Luann, The invention of childhood in Victorian autobiography, in G. Landon (ed.) *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press (1979), p. 64.

Warner, M. (Ed.) (1993) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press

Wilders, Geert, *De agenda van hoop en optimisme* ([www.pvv.nl](http://www.pvv.nl), 2010)

Wood, Mary (2007), 'Italian film noir', in *European Film Noir*, ed. by Andrew Spicer, Manchester: Manchester University Press (236-72), p. 244.

Zangrilli, Franco, *Pirandello postmoderno?* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2008)

Zeh, Juli, *Corpus Delicti. Ein Prozess* (Munich: Random House, 2010)

Zima, Pierre V., *Der gleichgültige Held. Textsoziologische Untersuchungen über Camus, Moravia und Sartre* (Stuttgart: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2004)

Zoe Heller, 'One Day in the Life', in *New York Times Book Review*, (20/03/2005), p. 1.

Zola, Irving, 'Medicine as an Institution of Social Control: The Medicalization of Society', *The Sociology Review* (1972), 20(4), pp. 487-504.